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AGATHA BEAUFORT;

OR,

FAMILY PRIDE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "PIQUE."

Her name was Beauty—of a skin
Ne swarte, ne browne—this fair ladye
Like Luna shone, outglittering
The stars—so she all rivalrie.

Romant de la Rose.

VOL. III.

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AGATHA BEAUFORT;

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CHAPTER I.

MARGARET'S disappearance from the Abbey created indescribable confusion and consternation.

Mrs Beaufort received the intelligence, which was imparted to her by Cartaret late on the afternoon of the day of Margaret's departure, with transports of indignation and angry incredulity. Refusing to believe in the possibility of her poor dependant cousin daring to hazard such a step as to depart from Methwold without first obtaining her sanction, Mrs Beaufort swept past the astonished Cartaret (who, accustomed as she was to her mistress's bursts of passion, scarcely expected to see her wrath so fearfully kindled by tidings of the defection of an insignificant per-

sonage like Miss Desmond) and proceeded to Margaret's apartment. Here, however, the careful arrangement of everything in the room, and, above all, the sight of the packed trunk, placed conspicuously near the window, plainly testified that Margaret's absence from the Abbey, whatever might be its motive or cause, was a premeditated one.

When Mrs Beaufort returned to her sitting-room, her first act was to send for Mr Braddyll, to consult with him on the best means of punishing this audacious defiance of her commands. Cartaret, however, returned to her mistress with the information that Mr Braddyll was from home, and had left word that he should be absent until the following morning.

Mrs Beaufort then despatched a message to summon Alice Berners to her presence. From the hour that Lilian Grant sought Alice's chamber, and, disregarding her remonstrances, had compelled her perusal of the fatal letter in which Margaret's writing had been so successfully counterfeited, a change came over Miss Berners' spirit and demeanour. An air of gloomy abstraction and reserve replaced those smiles, imparting such enchanting grace and animation to her face; and an expression of harsh determination and suspicion lurked in her eyes. She was pale, and

daily her love of solitude and seclusion increased. So unsatisfactory had her demeanour become, in the opinion of the crafty Lilian, that now she judged it most expedient to reveal nothing more to Alice than was divulged in the letter she had forced her to read. Alice, therefore, was perfectly ignorant of Mark Braddyll's attack on Margaret's liberty, and of Lilian's ingenious counterplot; which at once answered his avowed purpose of procuring Margaret's absence from the Abbey, and achieved her own, by afterwards skilfully removing her rival to a distance.

Calculating, from the determined spirit Margaret had several times displayed, that she would resent Mrs Beaufort's intemperate anger, and the letter so falsely attributed to her, by leaving the Abbey, Lilian and her subtle colleague had each separately laid their schemes; while, although their designs for a time seemed to flow briskly along in the same channel, in reality, nothing could be further apart than their ultimate issue. When Mr Braddyll boldly proposed Margaret's *enlèvement* and removal from the kingdom, under pretext of their mutual advantage—to insure Alice's triumph over her rival, and their own final inheritance of Methwold Abbey—Lilian was not deceived. She had watched the gradual attachment

growing between Margaret and Leonard Somerton, and to prevent their marriage, therefore,—as Mr Braddyll protested that such a union must be fatal to his designs on the Beaufort patrimony,—became necessarily also her paramount object. But, with ill-suppressed jealousy and rage, she had likewise marked Mr Braddyll's admiration for Margaret. Often the bare suspicion of her betrothed's faithlessness roused such paroxysms of fury in her breast, that it was only at the cost of most agonizing self-command that Lilian hid from all eyes the anguish which tortured her.

No better scheme than the one Mr Braddyll projected could be devised to create an irreparable breach between Mrs Beaufort and Margaret, so as to deprive the latter of her cousin's protection and favour. So far, therefore, Lilian and her colleague agreed, and Margaret's banishment from the Abbey became the object of their united guilty designs. This accomplished, in order to remove Margaret from Mark Braddyll's power and pursuit, the jealous Lilian devised the anonymous communication to Mr Compton. Great and important results are almost invariably achieved at the expense of corresponding risk and hazard. Lilian knew this, and

wisely conjectured that the chances were ten to one in her favour, that Margaret, having once experienced a foretaste of the destiny reserved for her when in Mr Braddyll's power, to save herself from falling again into his hands, would voluntarily adopt secrecy and caution during the limited period her letter enjoined it. Lilian, when she reasoned thus, knew not of Margaret's unacknowledged engagement to Leonard Somerton ; for of the two letters so dishonourably stolen by Mr Braddyll, the one addressed to Mr Carnegie was only shown her, as it contained the information enabling him so successfully to plan Margaret's *enlèvement*; the other, with indignation, passionate though suppressed, he immediately committed to the flames.

Meanwhile, Alice Berners, obedient to her summons, proceeded to Mrs Beaufort's presence. Of Mr Braddyll's schemes, subsequent to the sending of the letter, as before stated, she was profoundly ignorant : but the knowledge, limited as it was, that she possessed of his proceedings, was enough to cover her with guilty confusion ; and, as the result was unfolded to her, to bow down her heart in sorrowful dismay. She entered Mrs Beaufort's presence, nevertheless, with a calm, composed deportment, and answered her rapid queries

with cool decision; for in minds resolute as that of Alice, the consciousness of crime, and the keen necessity too often felt for its concealment, even at the expense of added guilt, gives that outward *sang froid* and self-possession which frequently assume the semblance of innocence. She offered no conjecture on Margaret's absence; sought neither to aggravate nor extenuate her conduct; and listened in silence to Mrs Beaufort's assertions that, in defiance of her stringent command, Margaret had returned home. So remarkable did this strange taciturnity appear in the usually lively Alice, that it began to attract Mrs Beaufort's attention. Alice, however, rose, and, under some plausible pretext or another, left the room; so that Mrs Beaufort, exasperated at Margaret's ingratitude, and dissatisfied at the little sympathy displayed by Alice, was left to her own reflections.

Silent and sad Mrs Beaufort sat for some time after Alice's departure: her burst of passionate indignation over, the calm brought sorrowful depressing thoughts. When a proud, haughty spirit has been moved to unusual concession, and to unbend before another's seeming affectionate interest and sympathy, terrible is the reaction, should that confidence prove misplaced. Sorrowful and heart-

breaking must indeed have been the thought which presently, in her solitude, drew tears from the eyes of that pale, stern woman ; as she, the possessor of splendour, wealth and influence, sat lonely and friendless ; almost as much apart from the world and its busy interests, as if the roof above her sheltered a community of cloistered nuns. To no one could she unfold the history of those past years, which acted so mysteriously on her daily conduct.

Margaret Desmond—the child of parents whose names, from some hidden cause, she shrank even to hear ; though long years must, in ordinary cases, have softened the rancour of a resentment, however vehement in its commencement—she, towards whom her heart had expanded, and whose gentle tenderness of manner had won more of her regard and sympathy than was ever lavished on another, Ginevra excepted—she also had proved false and treacherous ! Yet neither, in her lonely self-communings, did Mrs Beaufort feel perfectly guiltless as to her own recent conduct towards her young relative. Abominable as was Margaret's offence, Mrs Beaufort was conscious that, perhaps, the outpouring of her resentment had been more vehement than wise ; and that a little less rigour might have brought the former to a penitent

admission of her fault. From Margaret, Mrs Beaufort's solitary musing took wider range ; and the ruffled brow and abstracted attitude, told then of thought, profound and agitating. Ginevra's bitter grief at her friend's disgrace was another anxiety, amongst the many oppressing her spirit. To inform the sick girl of Margaret's evasion from the Abbey, while she remained in her present precarious state, was a project too fraught with peril to be attempted.

Mrs Beaufort had, therefore, to bear alone the whole weight of her anxiety. Action, that sole remedy against depression, was denied her ; as, until Mr Braddyll's return, for many reasons, she judged it better to delay all endeavours to ascertain where Margaret had withdrawn. Besides, should her suspicion prove correct, and Margaret's place of refuge be her home, Mrs Beaufort was not without hope that the following morning's post might bring a letter from Woodthorpe, allaying all fears for the fugitive's safety. This was all Mrs Beaufort desired, as her anger and indignation burned too fiercely against Margaret to admit of any softer feeling.

Lilian Grant, in the meantime, unable to restrain her anxiety and agitation, and finding it impossible to meet Alice's questions with suitable composure,

resolved to spend the remainder of the day at her uncle's house ; for, until assured of the success of her scheme, even Miss Grant's hardened nature shrank from assuming that bold, indifferent mien, essential to brave any suspicion which might incidentally point either at herself, or her wily confederate. Lilian, however, was back again the following morning by the time Mark Braddyll returned to the Abbey.

His countenance, when they met, was flushed with triumph ; and his manner of throwing himself from his horse, and advancing to meet her, indicated one of his best and most conciliatory moods. Lilian interpreted his exultation aright : she knew that it was solely occasioned by delight at holding Margaret in his power, which promised him so speedily the gratification of the designs he had formed. With a smile no less cunning than his own, she returned his greeting ; and as Mark Braddyll proceeded, in low, earnest tones, to pour the events of the preceding day into her ear—while all his duplicity could not completely veil his joy at the victory he had achieved—*she* listened with that eager, though passionless repose of feature, defying the keenest observer to detect aught of outward emotion. Mr Braddyll looked at her with surprise. Her blind credulity and faith in his devoted

attachment appeared so intensely ludicrous, that a derisive smile curled his lip.

That Lilian, so crafty and quick-witted, should thus become his willing dupe, appeared incomprehensible. He dilated in praise of Margaret's constancy and courage; still Lilian's impassible face indicated no emotion. Mr Braddyll would have doubted, but that no loop-hole remained for Lilian to play him false, without criminating herself: besides, let her do what she might, Margaret was irrevocably in his power! With the same well-satisfied smile, therefore, he turned towards her, and in courteous tones requested to be informed of all that had passed at the Abbey, since his departure on the previous day. This intelligence Lilian, with one of her most amiable glances, vouchsafed to give.

Next came the important query, that puzzled even Mark Braddyll's reckless audacity—What story was to be invented, containing a sufficient probability of truth in it, apparently to explain Margaret's absence, raise Mrs Beaufort's indignation to the highest pitch, and induce her, for the present, to delay any active pursuit to recover the fugitive? This was a serious question; therefore, with looks and manner of very unfeigned eagerness, and concern, Mark Brad-

dyll sought the aid of his more cunning and adroit companion.

Lilian, at first, pretended to be as much puzzled as himself; and quietly listened to, and proposed a variety of schemes, all of which she knew to be impracticable. At length, with a brightened countenance, and the air of one suddenly smitten with a felicitous thought, she proposed that Mr Braddyll should delicately insinuate to Mrs Beaufort, that, Margaret driven to utter despair by her harsh censures, had probably eloped with her former lover, George Compton. Lilian then rapidly demonstrated the advantage which a generally received opinion of the kind might bring to their projected schemes: it would remove Alice's scruples as to accepting again Mr Somerton's attentions, if offered; whilst, if by any means the latter could be brought to believe it, no more powerful impulse would be needed to induce him to discard Margaret from his heart for ever.

Eagerly Mark Braddyll listened to Lilian's suggestions; and ignorant of the subtle means taken to give colour to the accusation she proposed, he saw only that its adoption would give him leisure to perfect and arrange his schemes: when once these were brought to the successful issue which he contemplated,

further concealment of his daring deed would be unnecessary. This settled, the pair then separated; Mr Braddyll, to present himself before Mrs Beaufort; Lilian, to seek an interview with Alice, and then to retire to her own room, to meditate by what suitable weapons she might on the morrow encounter Mark Braddyll's tremendous wrath, in case her intimation to Mr Compton should have been acted upon: which, intrepid as she was, she could not contemplate without a shudder.

The morrow arrived, and brought no explanatory letter from Margaret to Mrs Beaufort; as the latter vainly expected. Mark Braddyll's treacherous suggestion, therefore, began to gain ground in her mind; and Mrs Beaufort's aristocratic blood boiled at the supposition, that Margaret's infatuated obstinacy had betrayed her into a precipitous union, infinitely more disproportioned, as she remarked to Alice, than that contracted by Mr Desmond. With angry sternness she consented to wait a few days; to afford Mr Braddyll time to make inquiries in the neighbourhood, and collect sufficient evidence of Margaret's delinquency, before she corresponded on the subject with Mr Desmond.

Mr Braddyll was absent during the following

two days, ostensibly on this errand. When he returned home, it happened that Lilian, languid and pale, from the effects of a night of feverish restlessness and anxiety, was standing in the library ; having wandered thither with no definite object, but feeling all fixed employment was irksome. When Mr Braddyll unexpectedly entered the room, Lilian leaned for a moment against the table, and her lips whitened—the only external sign of emotion she ever evinced. Her presence was evidently a surprise, also, to Mr Braddyll ; for he started ; then advancing rapidly up to her, he fiercely grasped her arm. “ Lilian, Margaret Desmond has fled ! You may well shrink and tremble ! Girl ! have you dared to trifle with me ? ” asked he, in hoarse tones ; whilst his dark eyes, flaming with passion, glared first furiously at her, then on a pistol, which he had taken from his pocket and laid on the table when he first entered the room.

Not a muscle in Lilian’s face moved : firm and undaunted, she felt herself a match, in her cool self-possession, for the angry, excited man before her.

“ I, dearest Mark ? You surely rave ! Disappointment must have impaired your usual discernment ! But, lest the same unaccountable infatuation should induce you just now to see in me,

instead of your own betrothed Lilian Grant, the villain who has stolen away Margaret Desmond, I will take the liberty of disposing of that ! ”

And Lilian, who, during the time she was speaking, gently freed herself from Mark Braddyll’s strong grasp, now made a sudden dart at the table, seized the pistol, and with the swiftness of lightning, flew with it towards an open window at the opposite end of the apartment, and hurled it into the marble basin of a fountain, throwing up its clear spray close by. She was just in time to accomplish her purpose ; for in another moment Mr Braddyll’s arm was round her waist, and with savage fury he snatched her back from the window, and flung her violently from him on a sofa, which fortunately happened to stand near.

“ Vile, treacherous woman ! have you dared frustrate my projects ? Was it you who presumed to give the information that enabled Margaret to escape from the place where it was my pleasure to confine her ? Despicable manœuvrer ! do you expect to retain your influence over me ? ”——

Lilian Grant suddenly rose, and raised her hand with so imperative a gesture, that, despite his rage, Mr Braddyll paused. For the first few seconds the shock had stunned her, for Lilian’s shoulder struck

violently against the framework of the sofa upon which she had been so unceremoniously thrown. Now, however, sparks of anger seemed actually to gather beneath those eyelids, so seldom raised ; but her voice was steady and low as she spoke.

“ Mark Braddyll ! another volley of abusive words, such as those you have just now dared to address to me, and I protest by everything most sacred, that, without a moment’s loss of time, I will go to Mrs Beaufort and divulge all ! Do you hear me ? All ! I have the original of that letter, composed and written by yourself, which you bade me copy out again, counterfeiting Margaret’s handwriting. Calm yourself, Mark ; and be ashamed of your unmanly violence to a defenceless woman. Your next word decides my conduct ;” and, pale and desperate, Lilian seated herself again, fully determined, if necessary, to act as she had threatened.

Mark Braddyll fixed his eyes upon her, and words of scorn and abhorrence rose to his lips : but he turned at length silently towards the window. Lilian’s enmity in the present stage of affairs would ruin all his hopes, and involve him in endless perplexities : besides, the thought of Margaret’s probable reappearance to charge him with his villany, filled him with

alarm. Counsel must be asked of some one how to meet this emergency; who, then, so able as Lilian Grant? She must therefore be propitiated, and he momentarily temporize, to be avenged with tenfold malignity hereafter; if he found, as he suspected, that she was really concerned in Margaret's escape.

As for Lilian, she sat cold and resolute, watching the dark workings and suggestions of evil agitating her companion's bosom, and awaiting his reply.

At length Mr Braddyll threw himself into a chair by her side; and said, in a voice of forced composure, riveting his eyes on his companion:

"Lilian, dissension between us would resemble the folly of the miser who killed the hen that laid him the golden egg. Pray excuse my violence. This unexpected crisis demands indeed our utmost exertion; and you are as much interested in it as myself."

The only perceptible emotion on Lilian's brow was sullen displeasure; for the passion that momentarily lighted her face had vanished.

"When you speak reasonably, Mark, you will always find me willing and ready to co-operate in any of your plans for our mutual advantage. Now,

let me hear the history of this marvellous flight of Margaret's," replied Lilian calmly; maintaining, however, a very stiff attitude, and provokingly fixing her eyes on the landscape without, instead of turning them to encounter her companion's eager glance.

Mr Braddyll rose, and mysteriously beckoned to her to follow him into the recess of the bay-window; then, in low, cautious accents, he detailed Margaret's escape; adding thereto many embarrassing conjectures and queries, which a personage less skilled in deceit than Lilian was, would have found it difficult to confront.

"Well, Mark, I trust you perceive the policy of my suggestion in bidding you affix suspicion on Mr Compton. What can be more easy, now, than boldly to transfer to him the burden of your deed?" asked Lilian, quietly.

"If Margaret reappears to confute our assertion, what then, Lilian? Suppose Leonard Somerton should turn out to be her deliverer?" said Mr Braddyll anxiously. "What you suggest relative to Mr Compton is impossible: neither Mrs Beaufort nor Mr Somerton will be inclined to take what either you or I assert implicitly, and our tale would be easily disproved by a single visit to Woodthorpe.

No, Lilian, some other plan must be devised. I have caused inquiries to be set afloat in the neighbourhood of the Nook: ultimately we shall hear something; but now is the difficulty. If you have had any hand in setting that vixen of a girl at liberty, tell me at once, that we may remedy it in time: though what the devil your object was in plunging both yourself and me into this hot water, I cannot divine," added he, savagely.

"You are still pleased to infer that I know more of the matter than yourself; therefore, you surely ought to act implicitly on my advice. Mark, your object in ruining Margaret Desmond was, I suppose, to bring about the marriage of Alice Berners with Mr Somerton, that Methwold might the more easily and certainly be obtained for our mutual benefit and enjoyment; now, therefore, I tell you fearlessly, make it appear that George Compton and Margaret Desmond have eloped together, and your object is accomplished. Margaret has tasted too much and too bitterly of the tender mercies she has to expect at your hands, to appear just at present on the scene. I warn you that you have not a moment to lose: for if Alice should get sight of, or even a letter reach her from Cuthbert Stuart, farewell to the hope that

she will ever accept Mr Somerton as her husband," said Lilian, sarcastically.

"Do you know where Margaret Desmond is, or do you not? You speak as if you possessed certain knowledge of her elopement with this rustic squire, George Compton. Lilian, from a spirit of mean, grovelling jealousy, you have betrayed our interests! Where is the girl concealed?" asked Mr Braddyll, with lowering brow.

An ironical laugh burst from Lilian's lips as she repeated the word—"jealousy!" then she added, vehemently—

"As I hope to be saved, Mark, I know not where this girl is to be found! I will fearlessly take any oath you choose to demand——"

"I see! You sent, or caused private intimation of the peril which menaced Margaret to be sent, to this Compton. Lilian, as sure as there is a heaven above, you shall rue the day when you dared circumvent my projects!" exclaimed Mark Braddyll furiously.

"As you will! I say neither yea nor nay to the charge. I will only observe to you, Mr Braddyll, that it is dangerous to threaten, or attempt to play false with, an accomplice in any deed not

perfectly immaculate. You have the opportunity, during the next three months, to make good your designs on the Abbey and its appendages; which you have repeatedly told me could not be done whilst Margaret Desmond possessed Mrs Beaufort's ear. *I* tell you—and you know you have always lauded my discernment—that you may fearlessly accuse the girl of eloping with her lover. However, please yourself: if your courage and presence of mind fail in this important crisis, I shall know how to act, I can assure you; though I have not the advantage you are constantly boasting of, of being able to make Mrs Beaufort believe all you tell her,” said Lilian contemptuously, gradually approaching the door during her harangue.

Mr Braddyll quickly perceived that Lilian was neither to be intimidated, nor driven to an avowal of the part she had taken in Margaret's escape. Besides, now he was satisfactorily convinced that Margaret's deliverer was Mr Compton; and flattering visions began to rise in his mind that he should yet be able to trace her out and regain possession of her: a thing doubly to be desired, since she knew of Ginevra's existence. But Lilian must be propitiated: already her hand rested on the handle of the door,

“Lilian, stay one minute. At any rate, whatever may be my ultimate measures, I agree in the wisdom of the plan you propose: but, the evidence—the evidence, Lilian—how shall we find all things combined to prove it—such as George Compton’s continued absence from home at the identical time necessary to affix the charge upon him, and a thousand other circumstances?”

“You will not find this difficult, with a little clever arrangement of facts. Upon the same evidence *I* could easily undertake to prove a man’s innocence, and afterwards to show him up in the blackest colours! Surely Mark Braddyll does not require me to give him a lesson in this art!”

Lilian paused; she then advanced again to his side, and caressingly laid her hand on Mr Braddyll’s arm.

“We have had a turbulent interview, dear Mark. Go now to Mrs Beaufort, and see what steps she intends to take in the affair, and afterwards join me in the lake-house; then we will deliberate together, and turn all her plans, never fear, to increase our own ultimate triumph!”

CHAPTER II.

MR SOMERTON, in the meantime, had proceeded to London, in accordance with the intention he expressed to Margaret when they met at the Holt.

In the gravest silence and disappointment, both Sir James and Lady Mary Somerton listened to the communication that brought them this unexpected visit from their son. Besides Lady Mary's pleasing anticipations of Alice's splendid dower, the latter's beauty and fascinating grace of manner had gone far to establish her in the favour, if not in the affection, of Sir James and his wife. Of Margaret Desmond, Lady Mary knew comparatively nothing, and only remembered remarking her ladylike appearance, and pitying her sincerely for the abrupt harshness with which Mrs Beaufort occasionally treated her. Nothing could equal her ladyship's amazement, therefore,

when her son wrote that this apparently slighted young lady was not only a member of the Beaufort family, but one of Mrs Beaufort's nearest surviving connexions. The reason why the latter bestowed so inferior a place in her household on so near a relative, was still, despite her son's eager explanation, a mystery to Lady Mary; nor could she comprehend how Mrs Beaufort, who expressed such vindictive resentment against her cousin for forming what she considered an inferior alliance, could place another of her relations in a fair way of doing the same, by marrying within the sphere she had herself assigned her.

This fact alone convinced Lady Mary that it was not Mrs Beaufort's intention to do anything more for Margaret than merely to invest her with a portion of the family consequence, by graciously permitting her residence, for a limited period, at the Abbey, as her acknowledged kinswoman. Then there was, again, the subordinate position Margaret's family occupied at Woodthorpe. These objections—and many others, that Lady Mary's pride and vexation at the failure of the scheme she had taken such infinite pains to concert, raised—so discomposed her, that not even the arguments and entreaties of the son whom, on all other matters, she would sooner

forfeit much than contradict, prevailed, even so far as to induce her to suspend her decision, until, upon personal acquaintance, she could form a juster estimate of Margaret's character and admirable qualities.

As for Sir James,—a man of few words, and peremptory character,—he listened in high dudgeon to his son's plausible arguments; not one of which appeared to him worth the loss of Methwold Abbey and its broad acres. Sir James and his wife, however, knew Mr Somerton's character better than to attempt to carry their point with a high hand. They perceived that none of their expostulations had induced him to swerve one iota in opinion or intent from what he had at first expressed on his arrival. Lady Mary, therefore, never warmly contested the point with her son; but whenever he spoke to her of Margaret, her replies were generally brief and vague; and she took the earliest opportunity of changing the conversation. In everything else her tender affection and sympathy were so warmly expressed, and her soft eyes beamed so lovingly upon him, that, despite her opposition to his wishes, Mr Somerton could scarce feel resentment. But, deeply grieved as he was at this persevering and unkind thwarting of his dearest hopes, Mr Somerton was neither daunted nor

dismayed. His love for Margaret was pure and disinterested, and founded so thoroughly on genuine admiration of her character, that opposition seemed only to add to his steady determination to carry his point.

It was about the fifth morning after his arrival in London, that Mr Somerton sat at breakfast with his parents in a lofty, cheerful room, overlooking the Park. The trees and verdure were in full freshness and beauty; the morning sun shone into the room, and a gentle breeze agitated the muslin window-curtains, and every now and then wafted towards them the clangour of military music from the Horse Guards. The trio, nevertheless, appeared inclined to partake silently of their meal.

Sir James buried himself behind his newspaper; Lady Mary reclined languidly back in her chair; and unusual gravity and thoughtfulness clouded her son's brow. The truth was, that the evening previously, Mr Somerton had made another fruitless attempt to induce his mother to consent to his marriage with Margaret, and to use her influence for the same purpose over Sir James. With peevish petulance, however, Lady Mary rejected her son's entreaties, and even bitterly reproached him for hi

desertion of her favourite, Alice Berners. Wounded and offended, Mr Somerton at length put an end to the debate by signifying his intention of returning the following day to Dingley; an announcement that doomed Lady Mary to a night of watchfulness and tears, as she knew her son invariably kept his word. No explanation had since passed between the mother and the son; although Lady Mary's eyes, swimming with tears, frequently rested upon him. Perhaps, had they been alone, Mr Somerton's entreaties might then have prevailed, and won Lady Mary's powerful protection for Margaret. As it was, however, the restraint was painful; and the entrance of the butler with letters, proved a real relief to all parties.

Sir James laid down the paper, and opened the single letter addressed to himself; whilst his wife turned over a whole pile of dainty-looking epistles, with no affectation of nonchalant indifference; several also fell to Mr Somerton's share. Presently a sudden exclamation from Sir James made both his wife and son drop their letters, and gaze at him with unfeigned amazement.

"The devil! What does it all mean? Leonard, this letter is from Harrison, the fellow whom you have just appointed at Dingley. After some inco-

herent rambles about timber, and the deuce knows what, he goes on to say that the elopement of a young lady from Methwold Abbey, whose name, he thinks, is Desmond, is creating, just now, considerable noise in the neighbourhood; and with this comfortable finale, he proceeds to sign himself my obedient servant!" exclaimed Sir James, rubbing his head, and looking at his son; who, long before his father had finished speaking, hurriedly rose and took the letter, which he eagerly perused.

An exclamation of thankfulness and joy well-nigh burst from Lady Mary's lips. She looked at her son; who, pale and agitated; leaned on the back of his chair, and all the mother,—the feelings of the fond, devoted mother,—returned. She rose and casting her arms round him, whispered—

"It may not be true, Leonard—nay, if Miss Desmond ever loved you, I am sure that it is not. I will go with you immediately to Dingley if you like!"

"I do not believe a word of it—'tis a vile fabrication; or, if a particle of truth exists in the report, it must refer to Alice! A thousand thanks for your offer, my own dearest, kindest mother; but, before I act in the matter, I must first consult Mr Carnegie. I will go to him immediately," exclaimed

Mr Somerton, kissing his mother's cheek, down which tears were streaming.

"You are still agitated, Leonard. Margaret Desmond cannot be false to you! The report, I doubt not, will turn out to be groundless scandal altogether," added Lady Mary, hastily and anxiously, as she marked the heightened colour that dyed her son's cheek.

"If so, will you then, dearest mother, grant your countenance and protection to Margaret,—to your son's betrothed wife? Believe me, that when you know her, you will love and appreciate her character much more than that of Miss Berners!" said Mr Somerton, earnestly, as his arm still encircled his mother's waist.

Lady Mary looked round at Sir James; but, hating everything approaching to a scene, the kind matter-of-fact old man had quietly withdrawn from the room, philosophically arguing in his own mind, that if the misguided young woman had really fled, so the fact was: no lamentation could bring her back again.

"Do not ask me to make any promises now, Leonard. Go, and consult with Mr Carnegie, and come back quickly, and tell me the result," said Lady Mary, hastily.

Being unwilling to extort a reluctant promise from his mother, of which she might afterwards repent, Mr Somerton immediately complied with Lady Mary's advice. Impatiently throwing himself into a cab, in less than half an hour he arrived at the hotel where Mr Carnegie had taken up his abode. Mr Somerton hastened to his room, and found the old man at breakfast.

Nothing could exceed Mr Carnegie's anger and dismay when he heard his visiter's relation. For a time, he contented himself with a storm of irritable comments on the improbability of Margaret's elopement; ridiculing the affair altogether, and slyly taunting Mr Somerton with his credulity in believing it. Suddenly then he arose, and pushing the table violently away, without uttering a word, approached the bell, and rung a peal that brought nearly the whole establishment of waiters to his door; and when, in answer to his vociferous clamours for his man, that important functionary thrust himself forwards from the throng, Mr Carnegie ordered him to pack up, and be ready within an hour to take the train to Denbridge. Then turning towards his astonished visiter, he invited him to accompany him down to the Holt. Despite his

anxiety, Mr Somerton could not refrain from laughing heartily at Mr Carnegie's comical figure. He stood on the hearth-rug, looking hot and hurried, repeatedly drawing his fingers through his long flaxen hair, as was his habit when excited. Finally, Mr Carnegie abruptly wished his guest good morning, and left the room ; giving Mr Somerton many injunctions to be punctual at their place of rendezvous—the railway station.

At the Abbey, meanwhile, the fact of Margaret's elopement with Mr Compton had, in Mrs Beaufort's opinion, been satisfactorily established. Lilian Grant and Mr Braddyll, when questioned on the subject, both declared that Margaret frequently made George Compton the theme of her conversation ; and the latter even asserted that, more than once, Miss Desmond, when exasperated, had openly boasted in his presence that an affluent home was easily obtainable whenever she wearied of being Mrs Beaufort's neglected dependant. If Mrs Beaufort's suspicion did once point at the probability that Mark Braddyll might have some hand in Margaret's mysterious disappearance, the doubt was at once dissipated when, at Ginevra's suggestion, she secretly despatched a person to Woodthorpe to take private observation

of Mr Compton's family ; and her emissary returned with the intelligence, that during the last week Mr George Compton had been absent from his home, and that no one in the village, even including his parents, knew whither he was gone. The evidence of several people, who met Margaret wandering alone on the high road, was also diligently collected, and submitted to Mrs Beaufort. The testimony, likewise, of the turnpike gate-keeper was adduced, to prove that a carriage drawn by a pair of horses, driven at a furious rate, had passed through on the same morning, and that the toll had been paid by a gentleman of a light, ruddy countenance, and sandy-coloured hair. The man, moreover, stated that the driver was a stranger to him, and was not in the service of any of the hotel-keepers in Denbridge.

A similar train of evidence was collected by Mr Somerton and Mr Carnegie after their arrival in the county ; both of whom applied themselves with eagerness to unravel the mystery : how heartfelt and earnest on one side, can easily be imagined. Mr Somerton's exertions were incessant. Cut to the heart by Margaret's faithless and cruel desertion, the very agony of mind which inaction brought, alone urged him to still more vigorous endeavours. He had been to Woodthorpe ; but his inquiries

tended only to the same purport as those previously made by Mrs Beaufort: to establish the fact of Mr George Compton's absence, which his father was at a loss to account for, and now began to contemplate with much anxiety.

With no better success Mr Somerton applied to Margaret's father. Mr Desmond, at the time he received his daughter's mysterious note, was suffering severely from a fall from a horse lent to him by Mr Compton, and for many days afterwards was confined to his room. Though the letter satisfied him as to Margaret's immediate safety, it inflamed to the utmost his naturally hasty temper. Burning with indignation, he wrote to Mrs Beaufort, demanding an explanation of the events preceding Margaret's flight from the Abbey; without, however, alluding to the fact that she had communicated with him. Mr Desmond's letter was crossed by one addressed to him by Mrs Beaufort, detailing in most stately and succinct language the history of Margaret's evasion; and communicating the dire suspicion thereby incurred, that the daughter, like the father, had thrown aside all proper regard for dignity of descent, and contracted marriage with a plebeian. Having thus explained herself, Mrs Beaufort took no further notice of Mr Desmond's letter.

The assertion of his daughter's marriage, Mr Desmond at once discarded as impossible, knowing her aversion to her quondam suitor: nevertheless, George Compton's continued and mysterious absence began to excite a degree of painful misgiving in his mind; and when Mr Somerton arrived at Woodthorpe, about four or five days after Margaret's escape from the Nook, Mr Desmond's anxiety and impatience began to defy restraint; and he was about, despite his serious accident, to set off for Methwold, to investigate the affair. Margaret, in her letters to her father, had never mentioned, or even alluded, in the most distant manner, to the prospect of future happiness which her probable engagement to Mr Somerton afforded; from a very natural dread, in her position, of assuming herself secure of a marriage, which, in a worldly point of view, was above her outward condition and circumstances. When Mr Somerton, therefore called upon Mr Desmond, the latter was reserved in his deportment; not knowing how far his visiter might be trusted, as he was so frequent a guest at the Abbey; and, as may well be supposed in the present concurrence of events, when everything seemed to convict Margaret of heartless disregard, Mr Somerton did not allude to the hopes he

had once formed. He felt it due to himself, to Sir James, and to their position in Woodthorpe, to maintain reserve upon this point, until the affair was cleared up, and Margaret exculpated; especially as, perhaps, in anticipation of the step she had now taken, she had had good feeling and honour enough to keep their *liaison* from her parents. Could Margaret have really loved him, and yet never have alluded, in her letters to her father, to hopes which, judging from his own heart, Mr Somerton knew must have been inexpressibly dear?

A new source of conjecture, however, was opening. Late in the evening of the one dull day which Mr Somerton spent in painful solitude at Woodthorpe, Mr George Compton returned home. If the latter had never before enjoyed the triumph of feeling himself elevated into an object of general attraction and interest, that gratification had now befallen him.

Mr Desmond questioned him openly, and minutely, on the business which had taken him from home; excusing himself on the ground of the strange reports circulated in the neighbourhood of Methwold Abbey; and he insisted that if by any chance Mr Compton was in the secret of his daughter's retreat, he should no longer presume to withhold its knowledge. Mr

Compton, faithful to his solemn promise to Margaret, stammered, coloured, and at length positively declined to answer the question ; with a firm resolution that excited no little anger and perplexity in Mr Desmond's mind.

Neither was Mr Somerton more fortunate in obtaining an elucidation of the matter ; though his demands were urged in as forcible, though in a more guarded manner, than Mr Desmond's. George Compton absolutely refused to give the slightest account of, or clue to his late proceedings. The result, therefore, was, that Mr Somerton returned in the utmost distress to Dingley, to report to Mr Carnegie his ill success, and the suspicions daily gaining ground in his mind.

Two more days elapsed, and Mr Somerton received private information that Mr Compton had again left home in the same strange, mysterious manner as before. In despairing perplexity, Mr Somerton hastened with the letter to the Holt, and found Mr Carnegie just in the act of setting off to the Abbey. The mystery in which his favourite Margaret's flight was enveloped, had increased Mr Carnegie's natural irascibility of disposition so greatly, as even to make him oblivious of those few acts of courtesy he usually lavished on his friends. The

chain of circumstantial evidence seemed so strong against Margaret, that for the last few days Mr Carnegie became less vehement in his declarations of her innocence ; neither could he extenuate her conduct, if she were the injured party, in not having appealed at once to Mr Somerton, instead of persisting in heartless silence, and leaving him to his own uncomfortable surmises and conjectures.

Any one casually meeting Mr Carnegie on the road to the Abbey, as he sat in a corner of the carriage wrapped in his scarlet cloak, with his features pinched up and sharp as a needle, and his eyes fixed in sombre threatening glance, must have thought him, despite his diminutive stature, a very redoubtable personage to deal with. Aware of his master's mercurial temperament, the coachman put the horses up to their highest mettle ; and soon Mr Carnegie found himself flying along the beautiful avenues and glades of Methwold Park. Arrived at the house, Mr Carnegie alighted, and, dismissing the carriage, walked up to the door, rang a loud peal at the bell, then entered the hall, and seated himself until his summons was answered. As soon as a servant appeared, he unceremoniously walked into the library, and despatched a message to Mrs Beaufort desiring to

speak with her privately without delay. A short interval elapsed ; then Cartaret made her appearance with a message of excuse from Mrs Beaufort, on the plea of indisposition ; adding, that she had orders to seek Mr Braddyll, as her mistress deputed him to be the medium through which she alone could receive Mr Carnegie's communication. With some little difficulty the latter restrained the vehemence of his anger, and flatly refusing either to see or speak to Mr Braddyll, despatched Cartaret back again with a message of still greater urgency. After a considerable time, Cartaret again presented herself to usher Mr Carnegie to the small drawing-room ; where she informed him her mistress would receive him.

Offended at the importunity by which Mr Carnegie had compelled her, much against her inclination, to see him, Mrs Beaufort there sat looking ten-fold more unapproachable in her stately self-possession than usual. Indeed, since Margaret's departure, there had been a restlessness and cold decision about her demeanour, surprising even to Mr Braddyll, the person who supposed himself most in her confidence ; and all that cautious reserve, and almost agonized anxiety, which once possessed her to preserve the privacy and seclusion of her private

apartments, appeared gone. She slightly smiled, and extended her hand as Mr Carnegie entered.

“ Well, madam, I have not been able to call upon you before, since my return home ; but now I am here to inquire all about this very unpleasant affair concerning Miss Margaret Desmond. I am sure it must have cost you much anxiety ; so, let me hear all : I dare say that I can suggest some plan for your relief,” said Mr Carnegie, with perfect *bon-homme*, taking a chair, and drawing it close to the sofa on which Mrs Beaufort sat.

Mrs Beaufort’s colour rose ; and she drew up her stately figure to its most dignified altitude.

“ Flattered as I feel by Mr Carnegie’s kind interest in my family affairs, I must still beg leave to remark, that had his counsel or interference been required to elucidate Miss Desmond’s late disgraceful proceeding, it would have been at once requested. Mr Carnegie’s amiable generosity, in never grudging his friends the full benefit of his opinion, is too well known to have caused me to hesitate in applying for it,” replied Mrs Beaufort, sarcastically.

“ Well, madam, considering our old acquaintance, I hope you would not,” replied Mr Carnegie, in the same amiable tones. “ Nevertheless, as I am some-

what interested in the fate of this young relative of yours, I should really be obliged for a few particulars respecting the events preceding her disappearance."

"I have no details to give, Mr Carnegie. Under circumstances of unparalleled treachery, Margaret chose to withdraw herself from my protection. I do not desire to become her accuser; for her own conscience will signally reproach her with the ingratitude by which she has requited my kindness. For any particulars, therefore, that you may desire to learn, I refer you to Mrs George Compton, of the Pool House, Woodthorpe," rejoined Mrs Beaufort, coldly.

"Exactly so, madam. But even admitting that Miss Margaret has made this little *faux-pas* (which, allow me to state, I believe you have been egregiously duped into believing), I do not see why she should be cast off by all her friends, for what, if true, seems to me to be more her misfortune than her fault. The relish for forming clandestine marriages evidently runs in the Beaufort blood: she is not the first member of that noble house who has sullied her purity of descent by bestowing her hand privately on some favoured suitor!" replied Mr Carnegie, sig-

nificantly, and with a shade of his old bitterness of tone.

Mrs Beaufort bit her lip. A look of extreme sternness and reserve crossed her face.

“ I do not understand your extraordinary digression, Mr Carnegie. I supposed that your visit to-day was to make inquiries into Miss Desmond’s fate, and not to investigate the past history of my family. As I cannot afford you the information you seek, I will wish you good morning. You will find Miss Berners in the breakfast-room,” said Mrs Beaufort sharply, rising.

“ By no means, madam : my visit is to you, and not to Miss Berners ; and I must yet entreat your patience. Now, ma’am, I am a man of few words ; and you will therefore, perhaps, pardon my bluntness, when I beg leave to inform you, I have arrived at the positive persuasion, that that infamous scoundrel, Mark Braddyll—whom, to the infinite disgrace of the Beaufort dignity, you are pleased to harbour under your roof—has some hand in the young lady’s disappearance ——”

Mr Carnegie paused, as well he might, under the haughty threatening glance that glared upon him. The very excess of her indignation kept

Mrs Beaufort silent. Mr Carnegie boldly continued ; his anger also thoroughly excited. " Look you, madam ! I have always understood that your temper is imperious in the extreme, and that your impetuous will always refused restraint or counsel. Be warned in time, however ! Your late brother, Sir Hugh Beaufort, would not have acted as you have done ; but, on the contrary, would have extended both protection and love to the daughter of his cousin, Francis Desmond. He would have calmly investigated the circumstances, and have at once perceived how utterly impossible it is for Margaret Desmond to have eloped with the individual whom you name. You know best, how far the mysterious reason which induces you to shelter this Mark Braddyll, will permit you to examine into the affair —— "

Suddenly Mrs Beaufort rose, and laid her hand heavily on Mr Carnegie's arm. Her face was deadly pale.

" Ralph Carnegie, who are you who dare speak to me thus ? By what means have you obtained apparent knowledge of many facts, that we, as a family, have thought fit to suppress from the world ? If it be only from mere casual intercourse abroad with my late lamented brother, basely have you

taken advantage of, and repaid any kindness he may have shown you!" exclaimed she, excitedly.

A peculiar smile flitted over Mr Carnegie's face, as he looked on the agitation his words occasioned.

"Any knowledge I possess of you, madam, or of your concerns, will be diligently used to see that right be done to the innocent—and let me add, to the injured also! The present moment is not the one to explain the origin of what little information I possess, concerning either Sir Hugh, or his sister; though, I fear, they neither of them are the bright shining lights one might expect, considering the vast treasury of good deeds to draw upon, bequeathed to them by their noble ancestry!" said Mr Carnegie, gloomily. A keen observer, however, might have discerned a flush of emotion, and a hasty shudder, as he turned away from the fixed troublous gaze of the large eyes bent upon him.

"Your innuendoes, and the liberties that you arrogate to yourself, Mr Carnegie, are intolerable! I owe you no explanations of any portion of my conduct: you are nothing to me, and from henceforth, I will neither tolerate, nor receive you at the Abbey! This very day your conduct has been most unjustifiable,

in forcing yourself into my presence, and presuming to address me as you have done. Ever since you came to reside in the neighbourhood, you have taken every opportunity to insult and annoy me! I am firmly resolved to put an end to it. Whatever you have learned of my past life, you are perfectly welcome to proclaim; but this I know, that if it be a knowledge fraudulently obtained, I despise the unmanly, craven spirit, which seeks covertly to injure another's reputation! Leave my house, Mr Carnegie! I scorn and defy your threats!" exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, vehemently, while indignation brought the colour back to her cheek.

"Before I avail myself of the dismissal you so courteously tender, madam, may I inquire whether you are disposed to favour me with the information I request, relative to Margaret Desmond?" asked Mr Carnegie, with indignation equal to her own.

"Margaret Desmond, I no longer trouble myself about. I kept my word when I discarded her parents, and she—doubly treacherous and false—*she* shall find, however little she thinks it, that to her also I can close my heart!" exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, now so angry and excited, that she scarcely knew what she said.

As for Mr Carnegie, this last speech seemed to have roused within him the utmost exasperation : his small eyes glittered with anger.

“ If you refuse to explain the events which drove Margaret Desmond from your house, madam, at least empower me to institute a searching inquiry amongst the members of your household !”

“ I will not suffer an affair to be questioned again in my household, which I have once satisfactorily decided !” rejoined Mrs Beaufort, impatiently, and firmly.

“ I do not mean to say, madam, but what you may have ample reason for your suspicion of Miss Margaret’s elopement with Mr Compton ; but you see, I have taken a liking to the young lady, and as it is my habit to stick to my friends, her character, I tell you, shall be cleared, and all the world know the motive which impelled her, as you assert, to take this desperate step. Margaret Desmond shall not be sacrificed !” said Mr Carnegie, menacingly, elevating his voice.

There was something in the tone in which Mr Carnegie uttered these words, that seemed to strike Mrs Beaufort : her glance of contempt and derision died away into one of agonized doubt. At

length she turned aside, and said with forced composure,

“ We have discussed this question long enough, Mr Carnegie. Any favours you choose to bestow on Mrs Compton, can, of course, be no concern of mine !”

“ I have little more to add ; and then I will obey your command, madam, and quit your house !” said Mr Carnegie, in a deep, suppressed voice. “ Now, mark my words, Mrs Agatha Beaufort ! As you refuse to investigate this vile conspiracy against Margaret Desmond’s reputation and happiness, if within the next four months you do not voluntarily re-establish her beneath your roof, and tacitly admit your error, by treating her with the kindness and distinction she has a right to claim from you, Agnes Sullivan’s child, whoever she may have married—despised and scorned as her mother was by you—shall return to the Abbey, to reign paramount lady and mistress over the inheritance, that enables you to lord it so arrogantly above your fellows ! Despise the warning, and you will find that mine is no idle threat !” and without another glance, Mr Carnegie abruptly left the room.

Mrs Beaufort stood paralyzed with amazement :

her eyes fixed vacantly on the door through which Mr Carnegie disappeared. Anger, astonishment, and apprehension, mingled together in overpowering emotion. She pressed her hand tightly to her heart; then the grief, the unutterable anguish which convulsed her features, so altered their expression, that in the vehemence of her sorrow, years more than she had numbered, seemed to have left their shadow on her brow. Words, half formed, fell from her pale lips, while great drops of agony gathered like dew on her forehead.

She was tasting the bitterness of retribution—of that sure swift chastisement for past transgression, smiting through the worldly idols which she had worshipped.

CHAPTER III.

THREE weeks more elapsed, and no tidings of Margaret reached Methwold. Mrs Beaufort, either reckless of, or ridiculing Mr Carnegie's threats, issued no other commands for more active investigation into the affair; so convinced did she feel of the fact, that Margaret had in reality eloped with Mr Compton.

Overwhelmed with gloom and melancholy, Mrs Beaufort, however, secluded herself more and more from intercourse with her household; and confined herself almost exclusively, except at those hours when Mr Braddyll forced himself into her presence, to Ginevra's room. The latter was making rapid progress towards a partial recovery of health, and had in a degree been able to resume her old roving habits. That Margaret's room was not overlooked in her rambles about the house, will easily be ima-

gined ; and, ere long, Ginevra's ingenuity detected the farewell note left for her by her friend. Instantly she carried it to Mrs Beaufort ; but its perusal, instead of allaying the latter's anger, did but increase her suspicion by its guarded detail, and confirm her opinion of Margaret's elopement.

As for Mr Braddyll, his assumption of the sorrowing and deserted lover, was the perfection of acting. In his private interviews with Mrs Beaufort, he showered reproaches, mingled with dark threats and bitter taunts, on her careless disregard of his interests, and the frenzied violence of her temper, that had driven Margaret to take the desperate step she had done. No insult or passionate fury on his part, however, prevailed on Mrs Beaufort to explain her difference with Margaret, or to show the letter, its cause ; although Mr Braddyll pretended an earnest desire to peruse it.

During several of these fierce contests, Mr Braddyll remarked a quiet, determined defiance, expressed more in Mrs Beaufort's manner than by her words. So much was he once, upon several accounts, impressed with her altered deportment, that, after leaving her sitting-room, he hastily returned thither, either with the intention of qualifying his

words, or of witnessing their farther effect; but Mrs Beaufort had quitted the room.

Mr Carnegie's threats, meantime, had been duly communicated to Mr Braddyll. A ribald laugh and retort was his sole rejoinder; and once having mentioned the fact, Mrs Beaufort referred to it no more. The only counsel Mrs Beaufort seemed now cordially to approve, and join in with Mark Braddyll, was, to hasten as much as lay in their power Alice's union with Mr Somerton.

Alice herself was far from being the most placid, contented member of the unhappy and divided household of Methwold Abbey. Depression and self-reproach had now rendered her morose and irritable. Lilian Grant's society she seemed to loathe and avoid. Mr Braddyll she never spoke to, or noticed—a disregard he returned with interest, now that the purpose seemed accomplished for which he had so long plied her with insidious flattery; except that, with Lilian's aid, he obligingly exercised the same rigid *surveillance* over her correspondence. For hours during the day Alice wandered restlessly out of doors, extending her walks to the most remote and secluded parts of the park. The brightness of her beauty was completely faded by the severe mental

conflicts of the past months ; and the heavy eye and fevered cheek denoted, too certainly, that her bodily health was likewise succumbing beneath constant anxiety. Captain Stuart's utter desertion filled her heart at once with anguish and resentment.

Eagerly she awaited letters from Mrs Cecil ; and when one was put into her hand, Alice fled to the deepest solitude the grounds afforded, to peruse it in hope and expectation. Mrs Cecil, however, never alluded to Captain Stuart—never hinted to her now repentant niece his movements, or discussed anything in which he was interested or engaged. Alice dared not directly ask for the information ; restrained by a hope, mingled with dread, that any interest she might manifest would be responded to by Captain Stuart himself : for, strange as it may appear that two such contrary feelings could agitate the same heart, Alice still recoiled from sharing his poverty and obscurity, and shrank from relinquishing for him her hopes of inheriting the Abbey ; though she knew that, if her ambition were gratified at the cost of bestowing her hand upon another, her peace would be gone for ever.

Leonard Somerton, meanwhile, continued to make most strenuous efforts to discover Margaret's retreat.

Once, during his eager search, a clue to the mystery seemed suddenly to reveal itself; the hope it excited, however, proved fallacious, and plunged him in deeper despondency than before. Mr Somerton also ascertained that several letters written by Mr Desmond to Mrs Beaufort had been returned from the Abbey unopened; a proceeding which still further betrayed that the latter obstinately maintained the same opinion of Margaret's conduct.

During this period of suspense Mr Somerton remained at Dingley, leading a life of the utmost seclusion. Many and eloquent had been the expository letters addressed by Lady Mary to her son, urging him to rejoin them in town, and seeking, by every argument in her power, to divert his thoughts from the subject on which they were absorbed. Her strictures on Margaret's conduct also, were none of the gentlest; and she adjured him, as he valued the honour of the family, and his own renown, carefully to conceal from the world the slight inflicted upon him by a nameless girl, whom she had ever judged to be unworthy of his affection. All Lady Mary's letters concluded by a positive assurance, that even had Miss Desmond's character proved unsullied, as he had formerly repre-

sented it to be, never could she, or Sir James, have consented to her union with their son. Then generally followed sundry specimens of feminine tact, in the shape of questions casually put by Lady Mary concerning Alice Berners and her proceedings,—enclosing sometimes Alice's replies to letters she had written to her. Lady Mary did not do this without design: she knew her son's refined, critical taste, and she was aware that, if possible, Alice's sentences flowed even more gracefully from her pen than from her lips. All this delicate artifice, however, failed to elicit a single allusion to Miss Berners in Mr Somerton's correspondence with his mother; until at length Lady Mary, alarmed at the gloomy desponding tone of her son's letters, resolved to appease her anxiety by immediately repairing to Dingley.

Accordingly, late one evening, much to Mr Somerton's amazement and delight, his mother, whom he thought bound as usual to her sofa by ailments of every description, arrived. To throw herself into his arms, was Lady Mary's first impulse; and amply did she feel repaid when she felt herself clasped to his heart, and heard her son's murmured thanks and love for what he knew to her was no common exertion and sacrifice. For some days Lady Mary suc-

cessfully exerted herself to chase the gloom from her son's brow, and lessen that distaste for every favourite occupation, which had gradually grown upon him. After the first long and exciting conversation that they had together after her arrival, she studiously avoided all mention of Margaret, or of her favourite, Alice Berners. In compliance also with Mr Somerton's feelings, Lady Mary even refrained from driving to Methwold to call upon Alice.

One morning, some ten days or so after her arrival at Dingley, Lady Mary entered the breakfast-room with a letter in her hand. She seemed nervous and excited, and, contrary to her usual custom, walked abstractedly to the hearth-rug, instead of advancing to receive her son's greeting. Mr Somerton, surprised, followed her; and, throwing his arm round her waist, asked, in a lighter tone than usual, what important news she had to communicate. Lady Mary raised her eyes, and then Mr Somerton perceived that they swam in tears. Seriously alarmed, then, he again pressed his mother for an explanation the more earnestly, as he perceived that the letter in her hand was sealed with the Beaufort arms.

"Oh Leonard!" presently exclaimed Lady Mary,

in an agitated voice, "I have had dreadful tidings from the Abbey this morning. Poor, poor Alice!"

"And what of Alice?" asked Mr Somerton, turning away, and resuming his seat, with an air somewhat vexed and chagrined.

"She is very ill—perhaps dying! Leonard, the contents of this letter were to have been held sacred from you, but I cannot refrain. Alice is dying: probably of a broken heart!" exclaimed Lady Mary, excitedly, approaching her son.

Mr Somerton looked up hastily. Painful surprise and concern were visible on his face.

"When did you hear this? Poor Alice! can nothing be done for her, my dear mother? Cannot we write, and request my father to exert his influence to procure Stuart's promotion, and exchange into a regiment on home-service?" asked he rapidly, rising, and attempting to take the letter from Lady Mary's hand. She, however, grasped it firmly.

"Captain Stuart? Have you lost your senses, Leonard? What has Captain Stuart in common with Alice Berners? No, Leonard; although Mrs Beaufort strictly charges me at present not to mention the subject to you, you must learn that you have

trifled with Alice, without once considering whether you might not be destroying her peace for ever ! It is for *you* that Alice suffers—*your* alienation which she alone mourns ! Oh, Leonard ! think whether your conduct towards her has been upright, honourable, and worthy of you ; and if, upon reflection, you cannot honestly pronounce yourself blameless, repair the evil ere it be too late,” exclaimed Lady Mary, imploringly ; though there was an unusual severity in the tones of her gentle voice.

“ You are mistaken, totally mistaken, mother : Alice Berners never cared for me, therefore I am guiltless of doing her any injury. Her heart is Cuthbert Stuart’s, whom she loves with all the fervency that a nature ardent as her own is capable of,” exclaimed Mr Somerton, vehemently.

“ What delusion possesses you, Leonard ! I never heard Captain Stuart’s name coupled with Alice’s. You never hinted such a thing to me before,” rejoined Lady Mary, in unfeigned amazement.

“ I never hinted it, my dear mother, because I did not think myself at liberty to attribute any *penchant* to Alice which she herself would not own,” replied Mr Somerton.

“ If this be the reason of your alienation from

Alice, let me tell you, Leonard, that you have been fatally deceived. She cares only for you! Mrs Beaufort is not likely to be mistaken, and she speaks in this letter most decidedly as to the cause of Alice's indisposition. Her words are severe: yet, Leonard, even for these, pronounced in condemnation of my only and beloved son, I can forgive her. She is Alice's only friend and protectress, and of course keenly feels her injuries."

"Let me read Mrs Beaufort's letter, mother!" exclaimed Mr Somerton, after a short and bitter interval of silence. "Alice's demeanour towards me is always flighty and coquettish, and never evinces a symptom of true attachment!" continued he, earnestly; yet while he spoke, the scene, long forgotten indeed, which happened in the bookseller's shop at Denbridge, recurred painfully to Mr Somerton's mind. He remembered Alice's emotion; and also the ill-concealed bitterness with which she then alluded to Margaret.

Mrs Beaufort, in pursuance of her design of accomplishing Alice's marriage, addressed herself in the first instance to Lady Mary; as it was at her ladyship's wish and instigation that the union of her son with Miss Berners was ever contemplated. With

considerable energy, Mrs Beaufort proceeded to expatiate on the injury Alice had sustained by Mr Somerton's volatile transfer of his attentions to Miss Desmond, after Margaret's unfortunate arrival at the Abbey. She then continued to comment on Alice's forlorn, unprotected situation, and on the cruelty and wickedness of taking advantage of it. Finally, Mrs Beaufort requested Lady Mary, as the originator of the scheme which threatened to terminate so unhappily for all parties, delicately to ascertain her son's sentiments and intentions respecting Alice Berners ; but upon no account to betray to him that this application had been made, as she assured Lady Mary that Miss Berners was totally ignorant of it, and would be much displeased were it revealed to her.

Varied were the emotions that flitted over Mr Somerton's face as he perused the letter : deep pain and perplexity, however, were pre-eminent in its expression. Lady Mary sat earnestly watching this conflict of feeling, hoping and praying that, however painful the moment, its issue might tend to the ultimate happiness of her darling son.

"Leonard, what answer shall I send to Mrs Beaufort ?" at length said she, in a voice faltering and sad.

Mr Somerton started.

“Mother, you know my sentiments for Margaret Desmond: you know I have loved her better than life itself, and that with her all my future happiness and interest in the world is fled. For your sake only do I now care to live. Can you then counsel me to seek Alice, when I have no heart, no affection to offer to her? and when I can only look upon her as one whose unkindness, perhaps, contributed to separate me from the only woman whom I have ever loved?” asked Mr Somerton, passionately.

“Margaret Desmond can never be yours, Leonard. Her conduct has been one undeviating course of artful, selfish, duplicity! Leonard, I conjure you speak not so! Alice will at length erase Margaret’s image from your heart. She is beautiful, good, and loves you with a sincerity which even your neglect has failed to destroy. Your very effort to atone for the sorrow you have inflicted, will bring a blessing. Consider, Leonard, as Margaret is lost to you by her own act and deed, will it not be a source of consolation to contribute to the happiness of the woman who feels for you such affection?”

“It is my firm, unalterable opinion, that were I this day to offer to Miss Berners, she would refuse

me. I do not mean to say that it would have been so at one time ; for Alice's besetting sin is ambition. Do not send any answer, mother, to Mrs Beaufort's extraordinary letter. I will ride to-day to the Abbey, and seek an interview with Alice. If she confirms Mrs Beaufort's assertion, which I cannot credit, and Margaret indeed be lost to me, it little matters what fate eventually becomes mine : but, mother, remember years must intervene—years, before I can plight vows to another ! Faithless as she has been to me, I still love Margaret, though she has so heartlessly abandoned me !” and Mr Somerton hastily rose and quitted the room.

For long afterwards, Lady Mary sat convulsed with grief. Sorrow for her son's disappointment, and mortification and anger that he should have been supplanted in his hopes, by an individual whom her pride whispered was unworthy to become his rival, agitated her in turn. That George Compton, the son of a tenant on Sir James's estate, should have succeeded in carrying off her son's betrothed bride, was a fact sufficiently mortifying ; although his engagement to Margaret had never received their assent. In years to come, would not Mr Compton be pointed out among the tenantry as

his lord's successful rival? The blue veins swelled and rose on Lady Mary's pale, aristocratic brow, as these humiliating thoughts rose, and she stamped her little foot passionately on the ground.

Her son, meanwhile, strove to regain tranquillity in solitude. Sorrowfully did he contemplate the results of his mother's ambitious schemes for his aggrandizement; and could Lady Mary have divined even half the anguish her deed occasioned her son, bitter would have been her self-upbraidings. With folded arms and knitted brow, Mr Somerton wandered through the gardens, endeavouring to recall every incident, and analyze every conversation he had had with Miss Berners; to see if aught might have passed between them liable to allow of the construction Mrs Beaufort put upon his conduct. The more he reflected, the more convinced did Mr Somerton feel of Alice's indifference; nor was he well enough acquainted with her dominant passion, to deem it possible that, for ambition's sake, she could be induced to sacrifice her most precious hope of happiness. To Alice's verdict, then, he fearlessly appealed; and impatient at once to be relieved of a charge so odious, and anxious to clear himself in Mrs Beaufort's opinion, Mr Somerton hastily re-

traced his steps to the house. In an hour's time he was on his road to Methwold, without having previously sought an interview with his mother.

Aware that, before luncheon, Mrs Beaufort never admitted visitors, save those calling upon her by special appointment, Mr Somerton, on arriving at the Abbey, at once requested to see Miss Berners. He was immediately shown into the morning room, where he found Alice alone. She evidently did not expect visitors, for her toilette was far from being adjusted with its usual elegance and care. Her cheek was wan, and her eyes looked large and unnaturally restless ; there was a painful nervous tremor, also, in her full round lip : altogether, her appearance presented such a contrast to the sparkling animation that shone in every feature of her beautiful face when last they met, that Mr Somerton's eyes rested painfully upon her. When he entered the room, Alice was standing idly by the flower-stand. She started on perceiving him, and her face and neck became suffused with blushes. She quickly recovered, however ; averting her head for a single moment to dash from her eyes the tears that had gathered during her reverie ; she then advanced, and offering her hand

apologized, with her usual grace, for Mrs Beaufort's absence.

"My visit to-day is made expressly to you, Miss Berners: but you have been ill, have you not, since we met?" asked Mr Somerton, anxiously.

Alice's clear eyes were raised for a moment, in earnest scrutiny, to his face; then they fell to the ground, and veiled themselves in their long silken lashes.

"I have been ill; but I am better—much better now!" replied she hastily.

"I conjure you, tell me truly, Miss Berners, the reason of this deplorable alteration in your manner, so visible lately to all your friends! Can I do nothing to aid you? Tell me, and I will serve you to the utmost of my power!" exclaimed Mr Somerton, taking her hand.

For a moment Alice turned deadly pale: she shuddered. At length she raised her eyes with a glance of piercing inquiry.

"Why do you ask me such a question, Mr Somerton? What are my anxieties to you? You can do nothing but leave me to myself!" said she, at length, vehemently.

“No, Alice, I must talk yet longer to you : and will you not kindly listen with your accustomed indulgence?” said he, earnestly, yet calmly. “I acknowledge that I have no right to intrude into your private feelings ; yet, when I—though most unworthy of having my name connected with yours, Alice, in any way—am falsely accused, by those in whom the world naturally supposes you place confidence, of having occasioned this sorrow, by heartless trifling and dishonourable subterfuge, I wished to hear my exoneration from your lips !”

Mr Somerton paused ; and narrowly watched Alice’s deportment. A crimson flush burnt on her cheek ; and her lips stood a little apart, as if for the purpose of facilitating her respiration, which now came thick and fast. Her eyes were steadily fixed on the carpet.

“Who is your accuser ? What does all this mean ? Mr Somerton, speak, I conjure you !” exclaimed Alice, at length, excitedly, burying her face in her hands.

“You know, Alice—as unfortunately it appears the scheme was revealed to us both—the design, I mean, that my mother and Mrs Beaufort once entertained of uniting us.” Again Mr Somerton paused : “In

short, Alice," continued he, "Mrs Beaufort accuses me of dishonourable trifling towards you, and insinuates that, had no obstacle arisen to prevent the realization of my mother's wishes, your heart would have deigned to respond to my suit; and that your illness is occasioned by indignation at my supposed desertion. I come to you to seek redress. Do you not think it is hard that both my mother and Mrs Beaufort should render me responsible, because you have met with another man destined to be more highly favoured and distinguished than myself in your regard?"

Alice did not answer: she sat still with her face buried in her hands. Her brain seemed on fire; for the whole force of her passionate temperament was roused. For a minute or two Alice really felt incapable of speaking; and thoughts, swift and agitating, exquisitely painful, yet triumphant—though Mr Somerton's words had not given cause for such—rushed in bewildering chaos on her mind.

"Alice, acquit me, I entreat, of the charge. As a man of honour, you cannot imagine how galling such an imputation is to me!" said Mr Somerton earnestly.

She did not attempt to withdraw it ; only, still she was silent.

“ Alice ! ”

Suddenly she turned her beautiful face towards him. He marked too well the tremulous glitter of her eyes, and the passionate quivering of her lips ; which essayed, though the effort was powerless, to utter the words that rose upon them. Mr Somerton fixed his eyes upon her, and read in the expression of her face that which made him recoil in dismay.

“ You *do* care for me, Alice ! Then it is indeed I who have caused this sorrow ! ” exclaimed he, vehemently. “ Yet, Alice, I never acted the dishonourable part towards you which this unexpected revelation on your part would imply. Forgive me, nevertheless, for the grief I have unknowingly occasioned you : and for the yet more bitter future in store for both of us. Alice, did you not once plight your faith to Cuthbert Stuart ? Why have you then rejected him, and transferred your regard to me, who am not worthy of you ? ” exclaimed Mr Somerton, in agitation rivalling Alice’s, suddenly confronting her.

“ Captain Stuart’s attentions to me commenced abroad : he came to Methwold only to receive his

final dismissal," murmured Alice, with downcast eyes and throbbing cheek.

Mr Somerton did not reply, and a silence of some minutes ensued. This period, however, sufficed to restore Alice's presence of mind, and enabled her to realize vividly the degrading position in which she was placed. With that queenly grace characterizing all her movements, Miss Berners arose.

"Mr Somerton, forget, I charge you, what, in my agitation, I have unwittingly betrayed! It was neither manly nor right to wring from me the avowal you have done! I will exonerate you in Mrs Beaufort's opinion: Alice Berners scorns to owe to compassion what she claims by right. Follow me not, I entreat you!" exclaimed she, with that lofty bearing which became her so well, walking towards the door.

With a rapid movement, Mr Somerton intercepted her retreat, and led her back to her chair. His face was very pale, and there was a stern, cold decision in the tones of his voice, that involuntarily made Alice shrink. She looked inquiringly at him.

"Alice, I am not worthy of the sentiments you entertain for me. I do not deserve your love, nor can I return it with the gratitude and devotion such

a gift ought to challenge. I love another deeply, unreservedly ——.” Mr Somerton paused, and turned aside.

Alice’s eyes were riveted upon him with undisguised anxiety and inquiry. At length a single word fell from her lips, and that was “Margaret!” and she paused.

“Margaret! Alice, cannot you conjecture her retreat, and its causes?” asked Mr Somerton, with sudden impulse.

“After the evidence that we have heard, we can but form one conclusion. The result of Mrs Beaufort’s inquiries must be as well known to you as to myself,” replied Alice, after a pause, gently.

“I will not deceive you, Alice: I have no heart to offer. I have loved, and have been betrayed; but not the less bitter is the memory and disappointment of the past. Beautiful as you are, you ought to be received as the best gift of Heaven. Alice, I cannot make you happy, nor ever repay your generous attachment ——.”

“Think of me, at present, as your sister and dearest friend, Leonard. Let me console you. In time, perhaps, you may consider my attachment worthy to

be rewarded with that affection which Margaret Desmond slighted ; but which would be to me a boon precious beyond all price. Leonard, time will assuage the acuteness of your grief ; and *then*, if you can honestly say that Alice Berners' love will compensate for the past, we will renew this conversation—but not before," said Alice, humbly. Tears trembled in her eyes, and a blush of bitter mortification and shame suffused her cheeks ; for she knew that her words falsely represented the feelings of her heart.

Mr Somerton sat in silent reflection for some time ; then abruptly rose from his seat by her side.

"You shall hear from me, Alice ! God bless you ! Would that I could better repay your noble generosity !" exclaimed he, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. Cuthbert Stuart's ring glittered upon her finger. Mr Somerton's eye fell upon the jewel.

The similarity of its motto, which in former days he had read, with that on the seal generally used by Captain Stuart, had first aroused Mr Somerton's suspicion of the former's attachment to Alice, which subsequent observation confirmed. He now determined to make one more test of Alice's feelings ; for the idea still haunted him, that Captain Stuart possessed more influence

over her than was compatible with her late protestations.

“May I take this ring, dear Alice, as a pledge, at some future period to remind you of our compact?” asked Mr Somerton, earnestly.

Again the colour momentarily waned on Alice’s cheek. She made a hasty movement, as if wishing to withdraw her hand; then she calmly suffered Mr Somerton to possess himself of the cherished token.

When Leonard Somerton left the house, Alice fled to her own apartment. Joy and triumph danced in her brilliant eyes; for she felt that the prize was won: a little space—then the honours of Methwold Abbey and Woodthorpe Park would be her own! Rank, and affluence, seemed at last obtained. For some time no shadow obscured her elation, and she paced up and down the room in the tumultuous excitement of her spirits.

At length she sank into a chair, exhausted by varied emotion; then she perceived for the first time that several letters had been laid on the table, since she quitted the room early that morning. Alice hastily stretched out her hand and took up one—the letter was from Mrs Cecil.

CHAPTER IV.

MARGARET, meanwhile, continued dangerously ill for several weeks after her arrival in London. Cold, fatigue, and agitation of mind, brought on a severe attack of fever ; and so critical was her state, that for many days her life hung on a thread.

During the crisis of the disorder, Mr Compton's condition needed almost as much commiseration as Margaret's. Remembering her urgent injunctions, that her retreat might not be divulged, combined with the danger from which he had just rescued her—and knowing nothing, moreover, of the events that had occurred at Methwold—Mr Compton naturally supposed Margaret's reasons for preserving her incognito, were of the gravest and most important kind ; therefore, though fully aware of the responsibility he was incurring, he resolved to delay informing Mr

Desmond of his daughter's illness, until her medical attendants should have pronounced a decidedly unfavourable opinion of her case. The unconscious state in which Margaret had lain ever since the commencement of her malady, confirmed Mr Compton in his resolution; added to which, he was encouraged to persist, by his aunt Mrs Russell's sanguine prognostics of the speedy recovery of her patient; and who, when she heard the history of her nephew's adventures to accomplish Margaret's rescue, voluntarily promised to share with him the blame and responsibility, should his decision hereafter be called in question.

From Mrs Russell, Margaret received the most devoted care and attention. She nursed her through her illness, and anticipated her wants, with the anxious forethought of a mother for her child. Carefully, also, Mrs Russell guarded the privacy of Margaret's sick-room; so that not one of the incoherent words, or agonized appeals, escaping from the sufferer's burning lips, fell on other ears than her own.

For three weeks Mr Compton found it impossible to tear himself away from beneath the roof that sheltered Margaret. Mrs Russell then took upon herself gently to remonstrate with him, and showed that a

longer visit might raise unpleasant reports to Margaret's prejudice ; so, with the utmost reluctance, Mr Compton at length consented to return home. His stay at Woodthorpe, however, was brief ; for when Mrs Russell, compassionating her nephew's eager anxiety, despatched a hasty note with the welcome tidings of Margaret's recovered consciousness, Mr Compton found it impossible to refrain from making another journey to London, to congratulate her.

Mr Russell, the husband of Margaret's kind protectress, was a kind-hearted, generous man, and fully coincided in his wife's good feeling and attention to their invalid guest. Indeed, Margaret's sweetness of disposition, and grateful acknowledgment of the protection she was receiving at their hands, in her hour of extreme need, rendered both Mrs Russell and her husband enthusiastic in her behalf.

As soon as Margaret was able to rise from the bed on which she had lain for upwards of five weeks, her first thought was to write to Mr Carnegie ; for the most cruel anxiety and suspense agitated her mind. To Mrs Russell she confided her history, and in return, received the account of Mr

Compton's several interviews with her father and Mr Somerton, which the former extracted by dint of most ingenious cross-questioning from her nephew, though, owing to a feeling of inexplicable shyness, Mr Compton concealed from his aunt that it was reported at Methwold that he had eloped with Miss Desmond. From this partial statement Margaret could not satisfactorily decide in her own mind whether her letter had ever reached Mr Somerton. Feelings of disappointment and even resentment likewise rose at the thought, that Mr Carnegie, after all his professions of friendship, had not made greater exertions in her behalf. Why had he not at once gone to the Abbey, with her letter in his hand, and called upon Mrs Beaufort and Mr Braddyll to explain the discrepancy between her actions and her recorded intentions: for, after her precautions to ensure the safe delivery of her letter, not a doubt of its suppression arose in Margaret's mind. Still more incomprehensible did Mr Somerton's conduct appear.

After much debating whether it would be better at once to disregard the mysterious warning to conceal her place of residence during the following three months, (which she rightly attributed to Lilian

Grant,) and return home without delay, or to write again to Mr Carnegie, and be guided by his advice, Margaret at length resolved upon the latter plan.

Could she, however, have divined the distress and misery her disappearance inflicted at Dingley Grange, there, undoubtedly, would her letter have been addressed. As it was, a feeling half resentful, half timid, prevented Margaret from again appealing to Mr Somerton, until she had ascertained the fate of the letter she wrote in confident belief of his love and protection. Their engagement had never yet been acknowledged; perhaps, therefore, Mr Somerton found that Sir James and Lady Mary's objections were insuperable; and consequently he despaired of making her his wife. And yet Margaret felt that she could have borne this bitter disappointment with more submissive resignation, had it been broken to her by his voice, rather than intimated by this cruel neglect. Then she pondered deeply on Lilian's motive in providing her with the means of escaping from Mr Braddyll's hands. Margaret attributed it to its right cause—jealousy; and the thought that the powerful motive, whatever it might be, which urged Mr Braddyll to such a violent procedure,

would probably induce him to make rigid search to regain possession of her, made her feel doubly thankful for her present safe refuge.

Margaret's kind hostess, meantime, did all she could to persuade her to write again to Mr Carnegie. One morning, before she left the room, soon after Margaret's convalescence, Mrs Russell drew the couch close to a table, upon which writing materials lay ; hoping, on her return, to find a letter ready, which she resolved to despatch safely with her own hand. A vase of flowers stood on the table ; also a newspaper and several books were placed within the invalid's reach. Margaret's illness had greatly altered her personal appearance. She was grown very thin, and there was an air of languor and debility in her every movement ; and not a particle of colour had, as yet, returned to her cheek.

For some time after Mrs Russell left the room, Margaret sat with her hand supporting her forehead, and her elbow resting on the table, thinking how she should address Mr Carnegie ; and revolving whether, without any great forgetfulness of what was due to herself, she could send an indirect message to Leonard Somerton. A sheet of the newspaper lay be-

neath her arm, when suddenly her attention was riveted by seeing in its columns that name which ever made her heart palpitate. In breathless agitation she grasped the paper. The paragraph was a brief announcement of the approaching marriage of Mr Somerton, the honourable member for W——shire, with the beautiful and accomplished Miss Berners, only daughter of the late Colonel and Lady Alice Berners. As she read, Margaret's sensations were overpowering: the paper dropped from her hands, which, in the excess of her anguish and distress, she involuntarily clasped together. Tears covered her face, and when Mrs Russell at length entered the room, she paused at the door in consternation at Margaret's agitated looks.

Mrs Russell then led her to the open window, and chafed her hands; blaming herself all the time for having left her. Attributing this sudden indisposition to faintness, great therefore was her dismay when Margaret continued to weep with passionate sorrow. Vainly Mrs Russell inquired the cause, speaking words of present sympathy, and hope. Margaret, however, was not to be comforted: her tears continued to flow, and, unable to articulate, she pointed to the paper. Mrs Russell

eagerly examined it: soon her eye rested on the paragraph.

With tender concern, Mrs Russell then tried to soothe the suffering girl. Margaret listened, and tried to glean hope and comfort from the exhortations of her kind friend; who earnestly implored her to suspend her worst anticipations of evil, until the truth or falsehood of the newspaper report was confirmed by Mr Compton's testimony: whose arrival was almost immediately expected, on a third visit to his aunt; as Mrs Russell justly argued, that the news of Mr Somerton's engagement, if correct, must have transpired amongst his tenantry at Woodthorpe. Margaret faintly assented: not that she had much confidence in the happy result of the inquiry; as she felt convinced that the paragraph was only too fatally confirmed by Mr Somerton's disregard of her letter.

To write to Mr Carnegie whilst she remained in such cruel suspense, Margaret found impossible. If her fears were realized, she shrank from meeting those with whom she had associated while her heart beat with happiness and hope: she felt that henceforth the neighbourhood of Methwold and Woodthorpe must be alike hateful; and that to live far

away from either, would then be the only boon worth aspiring to. Thoughts such as these, Margaret, in her deep distress, would have indulged in for hours, if left to herself; but Mrs Russell, who dreaded the effect of agitation on her already weakened frame, to prevent further conversation, took up a book, and began to read aloud, hoping to lull her to repose. For an hour or more she continued to read without intermission; at length Margaret slept. Mrs Russell then softly drew a table close to the sofa, and wrote a few lines to hasten the visit of her trusty colleague, in all that concerned Margaret—Mr Compton.

Two weary days of intolerable length passed away—on the third, Mr Compton arrived. Anxious and unnerved, Margaret besought Mrs Russell to ask her nephew the question, fraught to her with such unspeakable interest. The instant Mrs Russell mentioned the subject, Mr Compton's reluctant, hesitating answers compelled her to draw the most unfavourable inferences for poor Margaret. Mrs Russell, however, was not the woman to be baffled in her inquiries; so putting the newspaper containing the announcement of Mr Somerton's intended marriage into her nephew's hand, she demanded whether a similar report was

current in his neighbourhood, or whether the domestics at Woodthorpe Park had received any formal intimation of such an event. Thus hotly questioned, Mr Compton, very much against his will, (for he already conjectured that the Somertons were, in some way or another, concerned in Margaret's late adventures,) was compelled to confess that Mr Somerton's approaching marriage with Miss Berners was believed at Woodthorpe to be a fact, on most undeniable authority—that authority being nothing less valid than Lady Mary Somerton's own positive testimony. Mr Compton likewise added, that both Sir James and his wife had been staying at Woodthorpe during the past fortnight, and publicly spoke of their son's marriage as a settled thing; and that Lady Mary even mentioned the circumstance to his mother, during a visit her ladyship honoured her with at Pool House.

These were sad and heavy tidings for Mrs Russell to impart to Margaret. She was a person, however, of firm nerve, and undaunted presence of mind, though her heart glowed with the kindest impulse. Her first step was to console her nephew, agitated by mingled emotion at having imparted intelligence which, he felt inwardly assured, bore so powerfully on Margaret's fate. Mrs Russell, with a woman's

keen wit, had early perceived the ardent attachment which existed in George Compton's bosom for Margaret. He was her favourite nephew, and she had the highest opinion of his honest integrity of character. Mrs Russell loved Margaret nearly as well, even though their intercourse had been so brief; and instantly the consoling thought occurred, that perchance the event she now deplored might eventually be the means of making that nephew happy, and of bestowing upon herself a niece to whom she could become tenderly attached.

Margaret was eagerly awaiting Mrs Russell's return, when the latter entered the room, after receiving her nephew. A deep colour dyed Margaret's cheeks, and her eye sparkled with restless expectation. The gravity of Mrs Russell's face instantly struck her, for she read therein the confirmation of her worst fears. A slight cry escaped her lips; then making a hurried sign to Mrs Russell to speak, she hid her face in her hands.

For long after Mrs Russell had told all she had to impart, Margaret remained in the same attitude. When she at length raised her head, her kind friend shuddered at the change that had passed over her features. No tears shone in her eyes, and the

steadfast expression of her face excited in Mrs Russell inexpressible alarm. She had prepared herself, indeed, to encounter a stormy scene of grief; but this calm endurance had something so chilling in its aspect, that vainly Mrs Russell purposely expatiated upon every topic which she thought might wring from Margaret a tear. At length she rose, and rapidly retreated to her room. Mrs Russell followed her thither; yet the entreating, tearful glance, and the murmured prayer that she might be left alone, which arose on Margaret's lips, made her turn sadly away.

For a week afterwards, Margaret remained hidden in her chamber, unable even to endure the kindly gaze of her friends. A settled despondency gathered on her spirits, and insensibly she became more reserved in her communications with Mrs Russell. She dreaded Mr Compton's silent sympathy, for she knew that he had divined her secret. Still he lingered, as if unwilling to leave London without seeing her. Much of her leisure Margaret now employed in writing a long, explanatory letter to her father; wherein she imparted a brief outline of the events that had befallen her—studiously, however, avoiding all mention of Mr Somerton's name. She prayed him, in

the most earnest manner, to consent that she might remain some time longer under Mrs Russell's protection ; as the latter, and her husband, most affectionately pressed her to be their guest for several months longer. A strain of deepest dejection, and of anxious entreaty that her requests might be granted, pervaded Margaret's letter ; emphatic, likewise, was her prayer that her place of refuge might be still cautiously concealed. She made no complaint against Mrs Beaufort ; only she entreated her father not to enter into an angry correspondence on her account. Margaret slightly reverted to her late illness ; but fearing lest her father would be shocked and exasperated at the ravages which sickness and anxiety had wrought in her appearance, she besought him to delay visiting her for another fortnight.

This letter, when they met, Margaret put into Mr Compton's hand, begging him personally to deliver it to her father. Mr Compton promised obedience ; though the act, trifling in itself, caused him a pang of sorrow and disappointment ; as he viewed the fact of Margaret having taken the very first opportunity after they met, to charge him with the commission, as a delicate hint that she wished for his speedy departure : and such, perhaps, was Margaret's secret in-

tent, though gratitude forbade its acknowledgment, even to herself.

Mr Compton, however, had not leisure then to speculate on her motives ; as Mrs Russell, with that consideration ever distinguishing her, arranged that her nephew's first meeting with Miss Desmond should happen one fine afternoon, when she had lured Margaret into a promise to drive out for a short time. The cab was at the door ; Mrs Russell hurried Margaret into it, and getting in herself, a sign from his aunt soon induced Mr Compton to follow. They drove towards the Park ; Margaret, beneath the folds of a thick veil, striving to make herself as agreeable, and to seem as cheerful as possible. The afternoon was a most brilliant one, and the Park thronged with splendid equipages. Mrs Russell, therefore, proposed to dismiss the cab, and walk a little ; as she thought change of scene and exercise combined might be beneficial to her patient. Margaret willingly assented, and, together, they accordingly entered the Park. After walking some time, Mrs Russell found a comfortable seat for Margaret ; who, she determined, should remain as long as possible amid a scene which she thought likely to raise her spirits and divert her thoughts ; then leaving her to the care of

Mr Compton, she departed to pay a brief visit to a friend living close at hand.

So careless had Margaret become to outward circumstances, that Mrs Russell's manœuvre did not affect her in the smallest degree. She first made allusion, in the warmest and most grateful terms, to Mr Compton on his aunt's kindness; then, after talking a little on indifferent subjects, relapsed into silence. Mr Compton, on his part, said little; if ever he hoped that, eventually, Margaret might lend a favourable ear to his suit, he plainly perceived that the moment was not a favourable one to revert to it, so he wisely refrained. At the expiration of a short half-hour, Mrs Russell returned. Margaret was walking slowly up and down, leaning on Mr Compton's arm; looking fatigued, and suffering severely from a violent headache, occasioned by excitement, and the din of so many objects moving around. Mrs Russell therefore instantly hurried her away; and soon they reached the Park gate, and were rapidly driving on their road homewards.

Could Margaret have divined whose eyes had been fixed upon her in sorrowful reproach, during her irksome saunter with Mr Compton, overpoweringly great would now have been her distress.

It so chanced that as she was leaving the Park, leaning on her companion's arm, Mr Somerton happened to be walking at some distance behind, and at once recognised Mr Compton. He glanced hastily yet anxiously at the lady on Mr Compton's arm ; she was of Margaret's height and figure, though he was still at too great a distance to judge positively. The pair at length paused outside the Park gates ; when Mr Compton talked eagerly and earnestly with his companion for several minutes. Determined to satisfy his doubts, Mr Somerton hastened forwards. An elderly lady then presently joined them : she having evidently walked on to call a cab, for one instantly drove up. Mr Compton immediately handed the younger lady in ; her veil blew aside, and Mr Somerton, who was now close enough to distinguish features, looked once again upon Margaret's face. The cab drove away ere he was sufficiently near, even had he wished to do so, to stop it ; and Mr Somerton was left to digest, as well as he might, the seeming confirmation of his mother's assertions.

Margaret then was lost—lost to him for ever ! She had forgotten, slighted his love ; and deserted him, for a rival of a station and intellect most mortifi-

fying to his *amour propre*. Mr Somerton's proud heart swelled with indignation: yet his love for Margaret—his fervent truthful love—still seemed to plead for her, and soften his resentment.

If a lingering hope ever existed in his heart, that Margaret would, after a time, re-appear, triumphantly to clear her character, that trust had been now effectually extinguished. In sorrow and bitter disappointment, Mr Somerton returned home, to spend a long evening with no other companion than his own reflections. During that solitary evening, many of Mr Somerton's plans for the future were formed. He deliberated; and from the resolves then made, he resolved that nothing less miraculous than Margaret's sudden re-establishment in his love and confidence should induce him to swerve.

With clouded brow, Mr Somerton then approached the table, and sat down to write. His first letter was a very brief one to Mr Carnegie; his second was addressed to his housekeeper at Dingley, and announced his intended arrival there on the following evening; the third,—a long confidential letter to Lady Mary, detailed in simple, forcible language the extinction of every hope of recovering Margaret, which unconsciously might have lingered in his heart; and

avowed his conviction that she had indeed become Mr Compton's wife.

In the gentlest and most tender language, he then prepared his mother to hear that which he knew would inflict upon her grief and consternation indescribable: this was, his intention to go abroad for a year. At the expiration of that period, if Alice still cared for him, he hoped to be more worthy of her love, and better capable of contributing to her happiness than he felt himself to be then. He concluded by reminding his mother that he had as yet entered into no positive pledge with Miss Berners.

Alice had not seen Mr Somerton since the interview recorded between them; but, according to his promise, the latter wrote to her, detailing every incident connected with his attachment for Margaret. He told her that his heart could never more bestow itself, and declared himself totally unworthy to bind her faith by any promise or engagement. Again, after he had concluded his letter to Lady Mary, Mr Somerton addressed Alice Berners a second time. He informed her of his intention to go abroad for a year, and the reason of his sudden resolve. He

alluded then, gratefully, to her attachment; the thought of which, he added, shed the only gleam of light on the future. His letter closed with a request that she would grant him a parting interview, the day following his arrival at Dingley, when he could explain his plans more fully.

Varied were Alice's emotions as she read this letter. The open manliness of its tone struck her with compunction; for though Alice had deviated so far from rectitude, her admiration and reverence for everything good and noble was unabated. With all her dazzling beauty and noble prospects, Alice perceived that the man whose wife she hoped to become scorned to conceal or dissemble the feelings uppermost in his heart; and intense was her envy that Margaret—the despised, injured Margaret—had had power to inspire such loyal attachment.

Meanwhile, Alice diligently essayed to drown the rebukes of conscience, and to still the feeling of loathing and terror with which she contemplated the future, whenever the promptings of ambition were silenced in her heart. Cuthbert Stuart's name was the first word on her lips when she awoke in the morning; he haunted her dreams; and the thought

of him pursued her in her deepest retirement : to taunt her with her hypocrisy, and with her unprincipled abetting of designs she knew to be both wicked and cruel. The momentary elation she felt on the success of her scheme to snatch Leonard Somerton from Margaret, was over. Even the thought of the rich inheritance of Methwold, that most probably now would become her own, moved her no longer : she had bartered for it her future peace ; and that fearful debt had to be discharged.

Nearly as keen a pang smote the heart of the haughty, ambitious Alice, when she also read that short newspaper paragraph, announcing her approaching marriage with Mr Somerton, as had overwhelmed her rival. Provoked, and angry beyond measure, Miss Berners flew with the paper in her hand, and bitterly upbraided Lilian Grant for her officious interference. Already deep suspicion and doubt had seared Alice's heart against Miss Grant's plausible sophistry ; and her conviction was not shaken, that some hidden motive lurked beneath this officiousness : though Lilian, with downcast eyes, humbly replied, that by inserting the paragraph, her only thought was to offer, as she imagined, an acceptable homage to the family.

The premature announcement of her intended marriage wounded Miss Berners' pride on several accounts. Though she knew that now her future union with Leonard Somerton probably depended on her own sovereign will and pleasure, it was mortifying to her to reflect that he had not yet asked for that promise which should unite them ; nor ever even availed himself of the sisterly friendship she had proffered. Lady Mary, indeed, had several times driven over to the Abbey to call upon her ; and once, when Alice, bathed in tears, threw herself into her ladyship's arms, she felt her embrace affectionately returned, and had the satisfaction to hear Lady Mary's lips murmur the endearing name of daughter : yet, for many reasons, Alice wished that the public announcement of her intended marriage had been deferred, until something more definite had passed between herself and Mr Somerton on the subject.

Nothing, however, could satisfy or console Alice. She had obtained her object ; yet remorse for the part she had taken in Margaret's wrongful accusation, and a dejection the most crushing, paralyzed her energies. She abhorred herself ; and Captain Stuart's words—
“ The day will come, Alice, when you will loathe the

wealth and distinction you have earned at the expense of integrity," recurred to her repeatedly.

In bitter anguish, Alice Berners secretly acknowledged that the prediction was accomplished: yet her lofty spirit still shrank from repentance and atonement.

CHAPTER V.

THE day following that on which Mr Somerton met Margaret, rose beaming with all the brilliancy of a beautiful July morning. The soft, tender blue sky, spread overhead with scarce a cloud to mar its dazzling radiance ; flowers of fairest hues enamelled the fields, and blossoms hung upon the trees, expanding beneath the light and warmth of the sun. The joyous singing of the birds made the clear air thrill, and vibrate again with melody ; and the busy hum of insects basking in the sunbeams, or bathing in the dew-drops, which still glittered on the slender blades of grass, all told of vigorous, refreshed existence.

And a lovely scene it was ; that wide, open park of Methwold, with its woods, dales, and sloping lawns, covered with rich short grass, so thick, crisp, and elastic, that it rebounded almost beneath

the tread. Stately trees, either scattered in clumps, or gathered together in broad sweeping masses, threw dark shadows on the velvety turf, making the contrast with the adjacent bright expanse of verdure, glowing under the powerful sun, more vivid and defined. When the trees broke away, occasionally a distant glimpse might be caught of the rivulet—which, in front of the mansion, expanded itself into a wide, deep lake—flowing along like a line of light through glade and valley, till it again became shrouded by the masses of foliage overhanging its banks. It was one of those tranquil sunny days, when the heart throbs with delight and adoration while contemplating the glorious works of the Creator ; and the knee bends with reverence and awe, as every breath seems to proclaim his power and beneficence.

Along the narrow path on the outside of a thick wood, at a distance of some two miles from the Abbey, Alice Berners slowly wandered. The scene she gazed upon—one of the fairest glades of the park—was sufficient to make every vein thrill with the glad consciousness of life, and boundless faculties of enjoyment ; but with downcast eyes, Alice moved along, large tears gathering ever and anon in her dark eyes, and falling to the ground. The light wind

slightly agitated the long wavy curls clustering round her face and neck; for her bonnet hung from her arm. A little dog bounded before her, barking and scampering over the flowery turf—at times venturing to plunge amid the dark avenues and depths of the wood. Occasionally Alice paused to cull some bright flower, or to gaze on the beautiful, luxuriant landscape. Then again her eyes filled with tears; for hard must be that heart, and dull the perceptions of that nature, which does not feel its nobler and better parts roused, and even kindled to enthusiasm, by the contemplation of such a scene. A crimson flush burnt on her cheek; although the cool, fresh breeze from the wood, murmuring through the green foliage, circled round her. A letter was in her hand: it was from Mr Somerton.

In the space of one year from that time, all the noble expanse before her, even as far as her eye could span the landscape, might be her own prospective inheritance: for so, at least, had Alice Berners been taught to believe. The following day her lips were to pronounce the words which, pledging her faith to Leonard Somerton, should secure this magnificent heritage! Did Alice, then, seek this secluded spot to joy and exult over her prospects—to

build fairy castles, and to indulge in golden reveries? No! After a night of torture indescribable, she came thither to hide herself from all: to shudder and weep, to repent and to meditate upon atonement. Wealth and distinction lay at her feet: Alice loathed them. With repugnance unconquerable, she thought of the morrow, when she should be asked to accept the prize, for which she had betrayed Margaret's friendship. The riches that, in her cruel delusion, she had preferred to the one heart which beat so truly for her, were become abhorrent; and Alice, now that the crisis was at hand—now that she was about to reap the wages of her dissimulation—found that her fancied triumph was grief, and desolation unspeakable. The thought of Cuthbert Stuart, of his faithful devotion, and the heartless wrong she had done him, was unceasingly present in her mind; and, with frenzied anguish, and tears of agony, she acknowledged his empire over her.

But her sinful duplicity—her faithless desertion, even supposing that she wished to repair the wrong—had it not for ever separated them? Would not Captain Stuart justly execrate her conduct, and refuse to hold commune with one so culpable and heartless? Then, bitter remorse and shame for the part that she

had taken in Margaret's disgrace, overwhelmed her. Alice felt that she alone was guilty of everything that had befallen Margaret; that, if it had not been for her wicked connivance in Lilian Grant's schemes, the former would have been preserved from a marriage alike distasteful to herself, and displeasing to her friends: for Alice doubted not that, in the anguish of despair, Margaret had eloped with George Compton; as her wily confederates had too long distrusted her to confide to her ear their subsequent violence. The misery that she had inflicted on Leonard Somerton, also weighed heavily on Alice's conscience.

Through all this maze of sorrowful reproach and contrition for the past, a ray of light was slowly stealing into her heart: it was still time to make partial atonement; yet the anguish and humiliation of avowals, such as hers must be, shook her frame with strong agony even to contemplate; and the unhappy Alice bowed her face on her clasped hands, and wept aloud. She threw herself on the ground, and there, with her head resting on the mossy bank, she wept in utter bewilderment of grief. There was no human eye near to mark the convulsive heaving of her fair young form, or to heed the low suffocating sobs which burst from her lips. Great and

desperate resolutions mingled with her anguish : she had grievously sinned ; yet reparation, even purchased at the expense of all that a spirit proud and covetous of admiration and homage, most valued, was in her power. Her own self-respect had long ago fled ; that of the world, and of him whom, roused from her delusion, she now valued more than the world, was justly forfeit. She would release Leonard Somerton, publicly own her conduct in regard to him to have been deception, and justify Margaret as far as lay in her power ; then, this done, Alice's heart almost ceased to beat as she asked herself, what afterwards would be her own future fate ?

At length Alice raised herself from her crouching attitude, and with her elbow resting on the bank, and her cheek supported by her hand, she sat and thought. The heavy, lowering gloom in her dark eyes, and the severe expression of her features, were fully displayed as the light breeze blew back her hair from her face. Her dog, a petted, fondled favourite—inasmuch as he was Cuthbert Stuart's gift—lay by her side ; now basking in the sun, rolling on the mossy bank, or snapping at the flies ; but disregarded for the moment by his mistress. Suddenly, the dog, with a joyous bark,

bounded from her side, and scampered out of sight. Concluding that some rabbit or hare stealing amongst the long grass, had roused her favourite, Alice, though startled at first, did not trouble herself to call the dog back, though she still heard his sharp bark in the distance. In another minute, however, she precipitately rose ; her cheek then became very pale, and her respiration seemed to forsake her, as she leaned against the tree for support. Her dog was again in sight, but barking and gambolling round a gentleman who was advancing rapidly along the path skirting the wood. That noble, erect carriage, that serious countenance, so full of thought, and the moustache curving in a dark line on the upper lip, she could not mistake—Captain Stuart was before her ! Eagerly Alice looked round for shelter from his eye, and willingly would she have plunged into the depths of the frowning wood, could it have concealed her for ever. There was no retreat, however ; in another instant, her dog sprang fawning upon her. Alice stood, her eyes riveted on the ground : she neither advanced nor moved. Every atom of colour fled from her cheeks and lips : she dared not smile the welcome, guilty as she was, that her heart panted to offer. For some moments Captain Stuart's emo-

tion equalled her own: he did not speak; but it was her altered appearance, the transformation of the brilliant Alice Berners into the pale, shadowy-looking girl before him, that checked the words which rose to his lips.

“ Alice, it is as I said ! You are miserable ! You have at length seen that wealth and distinction do not bring happiness. You have found that for these it is not an easy thing to crush the most sacred and holy of ties ! ” exclaimed Captain Stuart, in a voice, the faltering emotion of which went to Alice’s heart.

He took her cold hand within his own. Still she spoke not.

“ Alice, do you intend to consummate this sacrifice ? Again I have sought you—*you* whom I have so loved, to beseech you to reflect. Only tell me, Alice, that the statement of that newspaper paragraph is correct, and I leave you without another word,—without a reproach for your disregard of my letters——”

She was roused. Hastily she looked up; her proud nostril dilated with emotion, and with difficulty she suppressed the hysterical cry that rose on her lips.

“ Your letters ! As God is my witness, I have

never received one line from you since we parted, Cuthbert!"

"Alice! I have written repeatedly: I have conjured you to come to me. How is it, then, that you say you have never received my letters? Who has dared to withhold them from you?" exclaimed Captain Stuart, indignantly.

Alice Berners' eyes flashed in the passionate vehemence of her indignation; and her features quivered convulsively, as the truth burst upon her mind.

"I see it now! Deluded fool that I have been! Who suppressed your letters? They, Cuthbert—they whose villany shall be unmasked, and who for every pang they have made me endure, shall themselves suffer tenfold retribution. Oh, Cuthbert! if I have injured you, fearful has been the retaliation exacted!" exclaimed Alice, in tones of piercing anguish and excitement.

"Hush, Alice! What does all this mean? Be calm, I entreat you. Why are you altered thus? Dare I hope, Alice, that it is for my sake? Is it that long ago you would have recalled me,—that you have tried the cruel experiment, and find that our separation is death to your happiness, as it is to mine? Alice, say so, and be my own again," said

Captain Stuart eagerly, as he drew her towards him, and kissed her pale forehead.

A murmur burst from the unhappy girl's lips; and she shrunk back from him.

"Cuthbert, do you then indeed still love me, despite my heartless desertion?" asked Alice at length, in a voice scarcely audible.

"Is it then so? Have you indeed forsaken me to become Somerton's wife? Alice, beware then that you break not his noble and good heart, as you have done mine. His wealth, hereafter, I tell you, will alike have proved a curse to himself and to you!" exclaimed Captain Stuart, vehemently.

"It has already! Cuthbert, my hand never will be given to Leonard Somerton!" murmured Alice, faintly.

"Those words, then, that decreed our separation—you recall. You give yourself again to me, my Alice, and share my fate whatever it may be?" asked Captain Stuart, eagerly.

Her pale cheek sank on his bosom; tears streamed down her face; and deep sobs shook her frame. Her punishment was bitter. At length she started away from him.

"My heart has never swerved from you, Cuth-

bert, never ! Even in the wildest aspirings of my ambition, Leonard Somerton never kindled an emotion disloyal to the faith that we plighted ! The bitterest repentance followed my heartless words when last we met : and oh ! Cuthbert, had not those letters been suppressed, which would have recalled me to my better self, and all my evil passions been quickened by despair at your utter desertion, even now all might have been well ! Ask me not now to share your poverty ! Cuthbert, your wife would be an everlasting reproach to you ! You know not how my evil ambition was tempted, and how I succumbed !”

Captain Stuart looked at her in amazement. In her agitation she had laid her hand on his arm : it was the injured one. His eye fell upon it.

“ The ring, Alice—my ring ?” exclaimed he, inquiringly. She hid her face in her hands.

“ It is Leonard Somerton’s ! Not given, however, Cuthbert : taken by him—yet with consent !” murmured Alice, in agonized tones.

“ He demanded, then, the sacrifice of that, the most sacred pledge between us, Alice ; and yet you, who now assure me of unswerving fidelity, *you* gave this ring ! Have you broken another heart also ?

Where is that Miss Desmond whom Leonard Somerton loved, and I know would have made his wife? What is become of her?" asked Captain Stuart, bitterly.

Alice turned aside. Mr Somerton's letter, with her handkerchief, lay on the ground at the foot of the tree: the wind had tossed the letter a little apart. She pointed to it.

"Read, Cuthbert, read!" murmured she, imperatively.

Captain Stuart stooped and took up the letter.

"I see in this letter, Alice, nothing but a confirmation of your heartless deceit! It seems that if you have not already spoken the words which separate us for ever, you are prepared to do so to-morrow. And you, Alice—you can forget all womanly dignity and self-respect, so far as to accept Mr Somerton's hand, on the conditions he tenders it to you? You rise to wealth on the fall of another! With falsehood on your lips, Alice, and on Leonard Somerton's, the words of one pledging himself to fulfil an unwelcome duty, you will plight faith to one another! What if I should reveal the past, or Leonard Somerton hear it from another quarter? Think, what will all the wealth of the world profit you, if you live

scorned and despised by the man whom you have deceived into marrying you? Alice, Alice, I plead not my own cause now—have mercy upon yourself!”

Alice sat as if turned into stone: she made no effort to interrupt Captain Stuart’s agitated words. When he ceased speaking, she raised her eyes wildly to him.

“I gave you that letter to read, Cuthbert, to prove to you that wealth might be mine. I renounce it—but, no longer dare I say, for your sake! Oh, had but one of your letters reached me!” she paused, and again hid her face.

“Satisfy me about Mr Somerton, Alice. How was he authorized to make you this insulting offer of his hand, when he tells you that his heart is Miss Desmond’s?” asked Captain Stuart, eagerly.

“I extorted the offer, Cuthbert. I thought wealth was preferable to your affection; therefore, I led Leonard Somerton to believe that his honour was compromised—in short, that—that my failing health was his work. When he spoke to me of my reputed engagement to you, I totally denied it: I saw that he doubted my word. Cuthbert, for no other purpose than to test my sincerity, Leonard Somerton

then asked me for your ring. I suffered him to appropriate it! My artifices were supported by Lady Mary Somerton's entreaties! She covets Methwold for her son. Do you not spurn and despise me, Cuthbert, for my duplicity? Is not the very name of Alice hateful to you?" and she rose, while in her distress the veins stood in rigid lines across her temples, and the blood suffused her cheeks and brow.

Captain Stuart remained pale and silent.

"Nor is this all, Cuthbert! Hear, further, into what depths of sin and craft the Alice has fallen whom you so fondly loved! My collusion with Margaret Desmond's enemies—Lilian Grant and Mr Braddyll—brought about her dismissal from the Abbey. We, by means of a forged letter, made Mrs Beaufort believe her guilty of ingratitude and slander: they, for what hidden purpose I know not; I, in order to break off all intercourse between herself and Mr Somerton. Yet I would have saved Margaret when too late; but I dared not! Lilian Grant held in her power proofs of my guilty connivance, in a scheme of which I knew not the issue. Yet, at the time, who would have believed this? They taunted me with that, and with your desertion, while sup-

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pressing your letters! They told me Margaret's art had already gained unbounded influence over Mrs Beaufort, and that yet a little and she would disinherit me! Margaret had already, I knew, conquered Leonard Somerton's heart. With fiendish skill they availed themselves of every foible, until the evil predominated, and I became as one of them! To obtain my end, I suffered Margaret, though I knew her innocence, to fall their victim; and since—since, Cuthbert—that letter has shown you my wicked triumph!”

Alice paused an instant; then, without glancing into her companion's face, she related the history of every event which had passed at the Abbey since their separation. As she proceeded, her voice became firmer and more audible: even the very hidden emotions of her heart she poured forth. She painted her remorse, the never-dying sting of conscience which ever tormented her;—remorse that struck her to the heart with shame and humiliation, in the midst of her most successful acts of hypocrisy. She told him of the resolution she had taken to confess all, and then to throw herself upon his love for forgiveness. Humbled and penitent with the sense of her sin, words such as in days past the proud lips of the beautiful

Alice would have disdained to utter, fell from her. As she proceeded in her narration, a feeling of unspeakable relief filled her heart : it was only a momentary gladness, however, that the first step towards reparation was made : dread and apprehension for the consequences of her misdeed overpowered her—for no word had as yet been spoken by Captain Stuart. He stood with his face averted from her. When all was told, Alice laid her trembling hand on his arm. There was a stern hopeless expression on his face that made her shudder, as he turned and encountered her beseeching gaze. With a cry, she fell on the grass at his feet.

“Cuthbert ! have mercy upon me ! Let me not hear your lips spurn me likewise ! Save me from myself !”

“Alice, Alice ! this terrible confession ! Why have I lived to learn that you, whom I have so worshipped, are devoid of principle—swayed by the violence of your passions to the perpetration of guilt so flagrant ! You have broken my heart ! You have henceforth rendered life joyless to me ! You have for ever destroyed your own peace and mine ! Alice, we must part !” said he, at length, in tones of the deepest emotion, turning away from her.

She sprang from her suppliant attitude, and turned her face towards him.

"Is my deed beyond forgiveness? As you hope to merit pardon for your own offences, Cuthbert, weigh well the doom you pronounce on mine! I will make reparation to the uttermost," exclaimed Alice, with strange calmness.

"I will never again take to my heart a woman who can have acted as you have done. Forgive you! May God, and they whom you have injured, do so, as freely as myself!"

Alice spoke not, though her head sank almost until it touched the cold earth.

Captain Stuart marked the anguish that convulsed her. He sprang towards her, and raised her in his arms.

"Alice, my unhappy Alice! life without you will indeed be joyless—with you it would be agony intolerable! Oh, why have you done this!" and the strong man's tears mingled with her own—tears wrung from the very innermost heart of him who had loved her so fervently and well.

"You leave me to the bitterness of sorrow—to the anguish of never-ceasing remorse? Have pity upon me! You never can have loved me, Cuthbert," said

Alice in broken murmurs, as she clung closer to him.

“Live to make reparation, Alice! Let not an hour elapse ere you seek Mrs Beaufort. Confess all to her. Let the sense of this your manifest duty sustain you. Think you that I shall suffer less, or that my grief will be lighter than yours, to see her, whom I have so loved, fallen thus low? Oh! what anguish will be Mr Somerton’s also, when he learns whose is the hand that has destroyed his happiness! Alice, I charge you delay not reparation. Ere we part, will you solemnly promise me this?”

“Mrs Beaufort shall know all to-day: I promise it, solemnly! Cuthbert, I have encountered your withering scorn,—I have listened to the words which blight every hope for the future. I can be courageous now!” exclaimed Alice, with quivering lips, despairingly.

“Delay not this atonement, I conjure you, Alice! Margaret Desmond’s safety may depend upon it. Who can trust the word of a villain like Mark Brad-dyll?” Captain Stuart then gently released his arm from Alice’s grasp. “Farewell, Alice: still dearest, and best beloved! I charge you again, delay not making every amends in your power. Then

leave this place of temptation, and return to Mrs Cecil. Farewell!" and Captain Stuart moved away from her side.

Alice stood with a face blanched to an ashy hue : but she made no effort to detain him—all energy seemed fled. Suddenly Captain Stuart turned back, and clasped her once more in his arms, and kissed her white trembling lips. Beseechingly her dark eyes turned upon him ; but sad, stern resolution still clouded his brow.

In that long lingering glance, Alice read her fate. Its hopeless misery crushed her to the earth, and filled her spirit with despair.

CHAPTER VI.

MEANWHILE, Captain Stuart's unexpected appearance at the Abbey created the utmost alarm and consternation in the bosom of the subtle confederates, Lilian Grant and Mark Braddyll. His visit was first discovered by Lilian, who, accidentally passing through the hall, took up the card Captain Stuart left for Mrs Beaufort. In an instant she flew with it in her hand to the library, where Mr Braddyll was. As usual, when excited, a volley of passionate abuse poured from Mr Braddyll's lips; and a scene of violent altercation and mutual recrimination ensued between Lilian and himself. When his anger had somewhat subsided, Miss Grant, who seldom lost her presence of mind, rose, rang the bell, and proceeded to put a variety of questions to the servant who received the card; and great

was her relief when she found that, after requesting to see Miss Berners, Captain Stuart very quietly withdrew, upon being informed that Alice was out walking in the park, without making further inquiries. With a triumphant glance, Lilian then rose, angrily crushing the card in her hand ; and, murmuring some sarcastic observation on her companion's late furious outbreak of temper, she swept from the room, feeling a comfortable assurance that Alice would never hear of the untoward visit.

Not so, however, Mr Braddyll. With secret disquiet and suspicion he had long observed Alice's sullen, menacing deportment ; nor did he feel so securely confident that Captain Stuart would withdraw without having accomplished the object of his visit : which, Mr Braddyll felt persuaded, was an interview with Alice. The danger and excitement of his position increased ; for if Alice were persuaded, by the revelation of the treachery practised upon her, by the suppression of her letters, to confess all she knew, and turn their accuser, he felt that such an event would materially diminish his chance of winning the prize, for which he had schemed with diabolical cunning. Hurriedly Mark Braddyll arose, with the intention of searching for Alice : the very

idea of her interview with Captain Stuart was maddening.

At this moment Lilian Grant passed the window. Mr Braddyll threw himself back again into his chair; for he doubted not that her crafty caution suggested the same fears, and that Lilian's errand was to seek for and bring Miss Berners safely back to the house. Too much precious time, he felt, had already been lost in efforts to discover Margaret's retreat; whose image, wicked and depraved as he was, Mark Braddyll still dwelt upon with the fondest admiration. Margaret was in possession of that, also, which, if ever she returned to Methwold, would balance his power over Mrs Beaufort. Either, therefore, she must become his, or it was requisite that the power to injure his influence which her knowledge of Ginevra's concealed existence at the Abbey gave her, should be destroyed by one bold effort; even if to make it, and relinquish her, cost him the most acute anguish and self-denial. Black and heavy was the frown that contracted Mr Braddyll's brow. The splendid prospective heritage of Methwold Abbey his own, and his enemies silenced for ever before the greatness of his prosperity, Mr Braddyll then cared not for Alice's fate. Mrs Beaufort once smitten to the

earth by the weight of the terrible secret he wielded, (and she knew not yet the extent of his power over her,) he felt that he could extort anything. His lawless passion for Margaret, combined with the knowledge that through her he could best and most certainly accomplish his dark designs, had prevented him hitherto from having recourse to the alternative he possessed—the use of this secret. Hoping, therefore, to effect his purpose without the risk of any future contingency, and at the same time to secure a wife of whose manifold attractions he might justly pride himself, Mr Braddyll caused Margaret to be summoned from her home. Lilian, whom he feared and detested, had rifled him of this triumphant success; revenge upon her would, therefore, be sweet. By one desperate act, too long delayed, in the vain hope of Margaret's recovery, Mrs Beaufort should be compelled to cease the useless contest, and succumb to his power, and Methwold might be his reward! Mr Braddyll then rose, locked the door, opened his desk, and during the following hour, with lowering brow, carefully examined several papers, which he took from a small iron box.

Mrs Beaufort, meanwhile, whose injury Mark

Braddyll so basely plotted beneath her own roof, sat in her own apartments, little imagining the scene transacting below. The sun shone upon, and lighted up the heavy crimson damask hangings of the sitting-room, so constantly Margaret's place of resort while at the Abbey. White muslin curtains were drawn across the window, and threw a softened light on Ginevra's fair, delicate face. She was reposing on a couch, and the bloom of returning health now coloured her cheek; for the crisis of her late malady had passed, and she was slowly struggling back again, (though, perhaps, with some slight improvement), to the state she was in when Margaret first knew her. Her blue eyes were closed, and their lashes rested on a cheek, clear and fragile-looking as alabaster. She wore a loose dress of pale grey silk: a book had slipped from her grasp, and the little hand that held it hung listlessly down by the side of the couch.

At a short distance from Ginevra sat Mrs Beaufort, though not in her usual place at the table. She was leaning back in her chair, her eyes were bent pensively on the ground; then sometimes raised, and mournfully fixed on Ginevra, whose hand nearly touched Mrs Beaufort's rich violet silk dress. The lines of care and anxiety clustered more thickly on Mrs

Beaufort's brow, since Margaret's disappearance. Her dark eyes were still piercing, and full of fire; and unbounded pride and determination of character yet curled her lip, and shone upon her pale intellectual face with undiminished power. As she sat buried in reverie, occasionally a deep frown contracted her brow, and the sudden sparkle of her eye denoted that the theme of her meditation was an agitating one.

Ginevra presently half arose, and pushing aside the golden ringlets shading her cheek, fixed her eyes on her companion. In a minute or two she glided from her couch, and with a movement indescribably graceful, sank on her knees, and threw her arm caressingly round Mrs Beaufort. It was wonderful then, nay almost magical, to witness the change which swept over the proud woman's face: the haughty glance melted into one of unutterable love; and the stern features relaxed into smiles tender and beautiful, as she kissed the transparent cheek so fondly laid against her own.

"You are suffering this morning, *madre mia!*" whispered Ginevra, affectionately.

"Not more than usual, dearest child." Mrs Beaufort paused and looked inquiringly on Ginevra. "Are you better and stronger, my Ginevra? I have some-

thing to tell you, which it will agitate you much to hear. *First*, I must, however, inform you, that to-morrow Alice Berners plights her faith to Mr Somerton. I have received a letter from him this morning——”

“ But Mr Somerton does not love Alice Berners! Mrs Beaufort, urge not this marriage, I beseech you! If Leonard Somerton marries through pique, or despair at Margaret’s flight, bitter for Alice will be his awakening! For I tell you again, as I have repeatedly done, that Margaret’s elopement with Mr Compton is a false accusation. Mr Braddyll knows more of the truth than he chooses to confess!” exclaimed Ginevra, vehemently.

“ If I thought so!—but no, Ginevra, the fact has been too clearly proved! Not but that the fear of Mark Braddyll’s odious proposals may have combined to urge Margaret to this fatal step. She ought to have relied on me, and on my protection: instead, she maligned and deceived me. She wrote that infamous letter, which has for ever closed my heart to her. If she ever truly loved Mr Somerton, she knew that this letter, once in my hands, would render her marriage with him impossible. Margaret acted wisely in securing Mr Compton for her hus-

band, while she might. He also, perhaps, would have scorned the secret slanderer and defamer," said Mrs Beaufort, angrily.

"You once loved Margaret dearly, *madre mia*: if she wrote that letter—if she thus betrayed your confidence—scorn, beyond measure, would justly be her desert. But listen—now listen, dear Mrs Beaufort—I am perfectly convinced that Margaret is also guiltless of that letter; and that the whole is a base plot contrived by Mark Braddyll, Alice Berners, and Lilian Grant, to alienate your affection from her, and to destroy her chance of a marriage with Mr Somerton," said Ginevra, quickly, unmindful of the displeasure which kindled in Mrs Beaufort's eye.

"Ginevra, you make random accusations to clear your friend. If you can prove Margaret innocent,—that Margaret whom I once loved and esteemed, and for whom I had reserved a destiny which should have placed her above the malice of her enemies; and that would have given her to you, my darling child, who loved her so well, as a protector and friend for ever,—I will thank you with a gratitude unspeakably great. As deeply as I once honoured Margaret, so do I now scorn her, for her shameless falsehood. Speak to me no more about her, Ginevra. Mr Car-

negie and Mr Braddyll take occasion to wound me to the heart through her; but they all—every one of them—shall yet be silenced!” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, with a laugh that made Ginevra shudder, so bitter and reckless was its tone.

“Tell me, dearest Mrs Beaufort, why Mr Braddyll so pertinaciously sought to marry Margaret Desmond, and why you consented to bestow her upon him, knowing how he had once betrayed and outraged me—your own Ginevra?”

The colour rose to her cheek, and, frightened at the boldness of her question, Ginevra’s head sank on Mrs Beaufort’s knee.

A look of anguish swept over Mrs Beaufort’s face: none but Ginevra could have asked such a question with impunity.

“Mark Braddyll sought to marry my heiress; I suffered him, therefore, to be the dupe of his cupidity!” replied she, in a tone of unmitigated bitterness. “It was to avenge and save you, Ginevra, that I consented to his designs on Margaret Desmond, until I learned to esteem and love her; then I vowed to extend the same protection to her that I gave to you. I would have redeemed my word, as I still will redeem it to you, Ginevra!” added Mrs

Beaufort, in great agitation. Ginevra looked up inquiringly, and asked,

“But did you not tell Alice Berners that, provided she wedded Leonard Somerton, Methwold should be hers? This it was that filled her heart with jealous hatred towards Margaret.”

“And I do not, cannot say that her expectations are impossible, if she marries Leonard Somerton; in whose honour I have the firmest reliance!” replied Mrs Beaufort, quickly, whilst her eyes filled with tears, as she gazed on Ginevra’s drooping figure. “At one time Mr Somerton paid Alice great attention; and I can scarcely believe that a fine, noble spirit like his could be swayed by interested motives. Alice tells me that she has bestowed her heart upon him; let Mr Somerton, therefore, make amends for the sorrow and anxiety he has inflicted!” said Mrs Beaufort, sternly.

Ginevra sank on a cushion by Mrs Beaufort’s side; the colour came and went from her cheek; and for long all was silent again in the room, save the busy hum of the flies basking in the mid-day sun. Presently Ginevra raised her eyes, shining with tears, to Mrs Beaufort’s face.

“But myself, *madre mia*—forgive the question—is

my own history never to be revealed to me? Tell me why you have so loved me, so as to make me—even miserable as I am—shrink to leave the world for your sake? Oh, this knowledge, I feel, would inspire me with new life!” and Ginevra clasped her hands, and gazed beseechingly upon Mrs Beaufort.

“Take new life, my Ginevra, then; for soon every circumstance of your history will be known to you. Wait a little; yet live, Ginevra, and thus bestow the only happiness I can ever taste!” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, excitedly, while her lips fondly pressed Ginevra’s cheek, which now rested on her bosom.

“And you will give me back to my parents! Oh, the joy of that moment!” said Ginevra, as she clung still closer round Mrs Beaufort’s neck, while tears fell from her eyes.

“I will do so, as far as it lies in my power: yet, Ginevra, suppose your parents should separate us?”

In an instant Ginevra’s tears ceased, and her cheek grew paler. She arose, and threw herself in Mrs Beaufort’s arms; then knelt at her feet.

“Never, never! Is it not then as I supposed? You are more to me than the father or the mother who forsook me! Oh, if the cost of my prayer must be our separation, hide it—hide the secret of my

birth for ever, *madre mia !*" exclaimed Ginevra, in a voice broken by sobs.

Mrs Beaufort stooped, and raised the weeping girl in her arms ; she then laid her gently down on the sofa, and kneeling beside it herself, tenderly wiped the tears from Ginevra's eyes, uttering words of fondest endearment.

Ginevra, however, was not satisfied until she had exacted a solemn promise from Mrs Beaufort that she would permit nothing to separate them : sooner than suffer it, she adjured her to conceal for ever the secret of her existence.

Mrs Beaufort still knelt by the couch, when a heavy step in the adjoining room made Ginevra start from her recumbent attitude. The handle of the door then violently turned : but unavailingly ; for, whenever Ginevra was in Mrs Beaufort's sitting-room, all the doors were locked, to prevent sudden intrusion.

Mrs Beaufort rose.

" It is Mark Braddyll. The sight of your tears and grief, my Ginevra, is the best preparation I could have for an interview with him !" said she, menacingly.

" Do not forget your solemn promise, *cara madre*.

If Mark Braddyll comes to urge you to any harsh measure against Margaret, consent not, I conjure you!" whispered Ginevra, faintly. "If you love me, save Margaret from that cruel, unprincipled man!"

Before she could reply, the room door again shook violently.

"Insolent!" murmured Mrs Beaufort, her eyes flashing angrily.

Ginevra arose, and passed into the bed-chamber; where she would have remained, had not Mrs Beaufort hastily followed, and pointed to the picture of the Lady Blanche. When Ginevra had hurriedly retired, Mrs Beaufort returned to the sitting-room, and pushed back the couch to its accustomed place. By this time every trace of emotion had vanished from her face: she then unlocked the door and resumed her seat.

"One would imagine, madam, that this apartment was the temple of some mystic rite. To obtain an audience of Mrs Agatha Beaufort requires at least twenty-four hours' notice!" exclaimed Mr Braddyll, sarcastically, entering the room, and rudely closing the door after him.

“You are right: it takes at least twice four-and-twenty hours to efface the unpleasant reminiscence such visits generally leave behind them. I am ready, however, to hear any communication you may now wish to make, Mr Braddyll,” said Mrs Beaufort, coolly, without a muscle moving in her face, as she pointed to a chair.

“Few women know better how to submit gracefully to disagreeable necessity than Mrs Agatha Beaufort!” said Mr Braddyll, ironically, nonchalantly throwing himself into the chair which Mrs Beaufort indicated. Mrs Beaufort sat stiff and silent. Mr Braddyll at length resumed,—“My visit to-day is made purposely to inquire whether you have heard tidings of Margaret Desmond. If you have not, I insist upon seeing, without delay, the letter occasioning your indignation; the violence of which, madam, I can well imagine was enough to drive her from the Abbey.”

“Mr Braddyll’s short, courteous method of expressing himself demands on my part a reply equally laconic and comprehensive. I have heard no tidings of Margaret Desmond; neither do I choose, for reasons best known to myself, to intrust that letter—which, I am told, Mr Braddyll is not quite so

ignorant of as he would fain appear—out of my own hands,” responded Mrs Beaufort, tranquilly.

The colour rose to Mr Braddyll’s face ; and he bit his lip until the blood gushed.

“ What is it that you are thereby pleased to infer ? ’Tis rather amusing, I confess, to hear the so-called Mrs Agatha Beaufort pretend to have scruples with me ! Explain your words, madam ! From whom have you imbibed the absurd suspicion with which you taunt me ? ” demanded Mr Braddyll, fiercely, drawing his chair nearer to the table.

Mrs Beaufort smiled derisively.

“ Mark Braddyll, you question me in vain. Suffice it that I *have* suspicions ; and it is my firm resolve to spare neither money nor exertion to discover Margaret Desmond’s retreat ! ”

“ Far be it from me to attempt to thwart so praiseworthy a design. By all means, discover and make reparation to the poor girl, whom your imperious temper and harsh treatment have deprived of so noble an inheritance as that of Methwold ! I do not believe, madam, that the letter contained aught to justify a tenth part of the violence you used : nevertheless, the consequence of your hasty deed will fall

upon yourself; for learn, madam, that I am neither to be foiled nor deceived by your arts. You know the compact upon which Margaret Desmond came to the Abbey: it stipulated for secrecy on memorable events in your past life; for the suppression of several inconvenient papers in my possession, on my part; and on yours the promise to forward by every means in your power, my marriage with Margaret Desmond: whom you then, for certain reasons, engaged to make your heiress."

"Have you kept your part of the compact on which I promised this? Have you delivered into my hands those papers, which, on my compliance with your demands, you solemnly engaged to do? Hypocrite! my existence has been a curse to me since my connexion with you and yours. When one dearer to me than life was lying on a sick couch, from which I thought she never more would rise, you took occasion to extort from me this promise to betray Margaret Desmond into your hands. Partly to save that dear one from your threatened violence, and partly out of a cowardly fear of the world's censure—for which weakness I now despise myself—I

was mad enough to comply. Like another member of your detested family, you skilfully availed yourself of the dislike and feelings of revenge, still alive in my bosom against Francis Desmond, to raise the deadliest distrust of his daughter. Your aim has signally failed ; for learn—artful dissembler, as you conceive yourself to be—that all along you have been my dupe ; and that Margaret Desmond, who abhors you, even had she not loved another, should never have been yours ! I will sooner see every acre of my family inheritance yielded to utter destruction than that it shall pass to you !” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, with fierce vehemence ; though every word that she uttered fell slowly, and with its due weight, from her lips. Mr Braddyll looked at her : his dark brows nearly met. In a moment, Mrs Beaufort resumed. “Circumstances have recently made me believe that Margaret Desmond has been falsely accused. You say that her punishment for the offence imputed to her has been severe ; but I tell you, that if I find my suspicion verified, her revenge shall not the less be so,” added she, menacingly.

It was not Mr Braddyll’s object to provoke and defy Mrs Beaufort to the uttermost, before he had previously tested whether, without resorting to means

which must terminate in an open contest for the mastery between them, he could bend her to his designs. He saw also that she was now violently exasperated: he marked the rigid sternness of Mrs Beaufort's features; her immovable attitude, and the fearless stateliness of her deportment. A smile then, false, as its very suddenness proved, glided over his dark countenance, and his voice had lost much of its threatening accent when he again spoke.

"Whether you are wise in thus threatening me—who, by a single word, could dissipate the high renown you prize so greatly, and prove to the world that the immaculate Mrs Agatha Beaufort is not quite the vestal that she appears—is for your consideration. I will not be diverted from my purpose by vague threats, when I hold substantial power in my own hands; therefore, madam, the world shall presently be as well informed on every point of your history as myself: unless you prefer to barter a reversionary interest over your estates for the sake of present reputation. I do not choose to await your search for Miss Margaret Desmond. You tell me that she abhors me,—well, I yield all claim or desire for her favour: but I must have an equivalent! On this condition I promise solemnly to restore those papers

in my possession, to suppress or to publish at your pleasure," said Mr Braddyll, resolutely.

"Name it!" exclaimed Mrs Beaufort; and her eyes seemed to dilate with scorn, as she fixed them gloomily upon him.

There was something in the self-possession of the haughty woman before him, completely as he believed her to be in his power, and at his mercy, which struck Mr Braddyll with involuntary awe.

"Having omitted to use your influence and authority over Margaret Desmond, to compel her to fulfil the compact we had previously agreed upon, while she remained under your protection; as your only alternative to avoid immediate exposure, you must now give me the hand of Ginevra Marescotti. I demand, also, that a deed be executed by you, madam, within the next two months, by which you bestow and settle upon Mark and Ginevra Braddyll the whole of your estate; reserving to yourself, of course, a life interest therein: the estate to be wholly and absolutely at my disposal at your decease. The hour you sign a deed to this purport, I resign into your hands all and every proof that I hold of any past inconvenient transaction you may wish to conceal. Whatever

precautions you desire to have taken relative to the production of the young signora——”

“Hold! Pollute not thus the name of my innocent child. She your wife!—Ginevra Marescotti yours, when your former heartlessness brought her to the brink of a premature grave! No, villain as you are, you have this time overreached yourself. You abandoned Ginevra before, because you imagined that she was dying; and sought to find a substitute in Margaret Desmond, and to force her upon me as my heiress: because that, in all human probability, she will long outlive me, and thus your eventual succession to the wealth you covet would not be endangered. Had you been faithful to Ginevra, she might once have been yours; and, with her, the rich possessions which tempt your avarice! But now, never! never!”

“Call her! Put the question to herself. A few months ago Ginevra Marescotti would have knelt at my feet to hear the offer I have just made her of my hand. She shall be mine!” exclaimed Mr Braddyll, recklessly, advancing towards the inner door.

Mrs Beaufort rose and intercepted his progress. Her figure seemed to dilate with indignation; and her dark eyes fixed themselves steadily upon him.

“Refrain! at your peril advance a step further! Do you think that a mother’s heart still beats within me, and that I will permit you to outrage my child? Rather than that Ginevra Marescotti should now become your wife, I would sooner see her lying dead at my feet!” exclaimed the excited woman.

Mr Braddyll retreated a step. A malignant smile presently curled his lip.

“Very well, madam, take the alternative then; and the world shall know, and triumph in the fact, that the virtuous Mrs Agatha Beaufort is nothing better than an impostor, and her whole life a mockery, and a lying deceit! They shall learn that, while persecuting her cousin, Francis Desmond, with unrelenting malice, for marrying, as she considered, beneath himself, this paragon of virtuous propriety and lofty modesty, some little time afterwards, was pleased to contract a secret marriage at Rome,—not, as the world would naturally imagine, with a crowned potentate, or a prince at the very least, but with her father’s young, handsome, and paid secretary, Gasparo Marescotti! The world shall know that from this union resulted a daughter, whose appearance opened Sir John Beaufort’s eyes to his

daughter's disgrace, and was the cause of his strange will; which an unexpected accident alone frustrated. They shall learn, moreover, that this tender, amiable woman—to say nothing of the heroism with which she parted from her husband, just before her accession to vast wealth—abandoned her poor, innocent little daughter in a foreign land, concealed her parentage, and when compelled to give her child shelter beneath her gorgeous roof, under pain of having the disgraceful secret revealed, shut her up in two rooms in a corner of that mansion of which she was born eventually the rightful heiress, because her mother's infernal pride shrank from owning the fact of her marriage with the son of an Italian trader! And what will appear more laudable, or natural, pray, than that I, her father's nephew, should aid and fight for the restoration of Ginevra Marescotti, to all the rights and advantages withheld by her unnatural mother?" said Mr Braddyll, coldly and sneeringly, confronting Mrs Beaufort.

"You will avow the truth, Mark Braddyll, and only leave me to add, that Gasparo Marescotti obtained my unwilling hand by as gross a fraud, and as wicked and violent a device, as that by which his nephew now attempts to force me to deliver my

daughter to like destruction. Though I succumbed to the snare, she shall not."

"Who will believe your pretended reluctance, when they look upon this picture of Gasparo Marescotti, think you, madam? Who will credit that the handsome Italian secretary had power to force Sir John Beaufort's proud daughter into bestowing upon him her hand, if it was not for love?" exclaimed Mr Braddyll, with malicious irony, suddenly opening the drawer which he knew contained the portrait of Marescotti. He then pushed the miniature violently across the table towards Mrs Beaufort.

A flush of passion suffused Mrs Beaufort's face as the picture slid towards her. She seized, and gazed a moment on it, then hurled the portrait from her: it fell with a crash on the floor. Mr Braddyll laughed sarcastically.

"People seldom believe or adopt a knave's story, especially when they know that revenge and interested motives have prompted him to turn informer! Nevertheless, Mark Braddyll, you will not execute your menace," resumed Mrs Beaufort, speaking in her former tone of cutting indifference.

"And who will prevent me, madam, except my pretty cousin Ginevra, from making what use I

choose of the very ample documents I have in safe keeping to prove the truth of my assertions?" asked Mr Braddyll, tauntingly.

"I will! I have supported your insolent deportment longer than befits me to have done. I will do now what Ginevra's apparently hopeless state of health some time ago seemed to indicate as a useless humiliation: within a week from this time, I will take my daughter Ginevra by the hand, acknowledge my marriage with her father, and publicly proclaim her heiress of Methwold Abbey!"

Mr Braddyll sprang from his chair with the most intense astonishment expressed on his face: for so utterly unexpected was this resolution of Mrs Beaufort's, so entirely subversive of his schemes, that at first he knew not what to say. He looked in her face to see whether after all it might not be a mere threat; but Mrs Beaufort sat, looking pale and composed.

"Have you counted the cost of your project, madam? Can you bear the cutting irony and scornful taunts of those amongst whom you have been accustomed to move so loftily? Or, above all, have you reflected on the exultation and contempt Francis Desmond will feel, when he learns that his haughty

cousin, while demeaning herself so arrogantly, secretly drained that cup to the dregs which he only ventured to sip?"

"I have calculated the cost of the revelation I intend to make. This, or a thousand other evils more cruel still, are as nothing to me in comparison to saving my child from the fate you have prepared for her. Leave me! for no earthly persuasion shall now prevent me from doing my daughter tardy justice!" replied Mrs Beaufort, resolutely.

Again the dark, defiant scowl hung heavily on Mark Braddyll's brow; and he angrily seized Mrs Beaufort's arm, as she would have retreated to the inner room.

"You think to brave me—to frustrate my designs—but you will find yourself mistaken! I have not lightly staked both future welfare and reputation on the acquisition of Methwold. Ginevra's hand, and with it her rightful inheritance, shall be mine: so secured also, that her probable early death shall not invalidate my future possession. I gave you the choice: Margaret—even without the inheritance—I do not scruple to say, would have been more agreeable to me as a wife, than Ginevra with it, could I afford to consult merely my inclination. That

scheme you totally frustrated. Now mark, madam, *Gasparo Marescotti still lives!* If you dare presume, therefore, to avow your daughter's rights, expressly to frustrate my designs—before signing the deed which gives her to me with her inheritance, at your decease absolutely—your injured husband awaits but a summons from me to present himself at Methwold. Think how your proud spirit will chafe to behold yourself bereft of power and state, and find yourself compelled, submissively, to practise your long-forgotten duties as a wife! Let Gasparo Marescotti but appear, and we shall see whether his wife or his daughter will dare to disobey him!" said Mr Braddyll, exultingly.

A shudder passed over Mrs Beaufort's frame: she retreated a few steps, and her features seemed to contract with excessive agitation. During the following few minutes she stood speechless and dismayed; while the most triumphant exultation sparkled in Mr Braddyll's eyes.

"You tell me a lie, Mark Braddyll—a lie most abominable and base, in order to gain your ends. There is no deceit, however vile, to which you would not stoop, to gain possession of the riches you covet. Gasparo Marescotti, twenty years ago when we

parted, took the most solemn oath, in the presence of the late Sir John Beaufort, never to approach the shores of England. From that day to this I have never heard of him; and that he is dead, I possess a testimony irrefragable as words: for when did one of the name of Marescotti ever regard an oath, however sacred? Now that I am rich—rich enough to excite the nephew's cupidity—is it conceivable that Marescotti himself, with apparent right on his side, should refrain from extorting further bribes?" asked Mrs Beaufort, suddenly, with bitter scorn.

"Your husband's moderation, madam, and unwillingness to break his word, even under the mighty temptation your unexpected accession to your brother's fortune presented, will, I hope, induce you to recall, with shame, the libel you have just uttered on your daughter's name and family. Let Gasparo Marescotti vouch for his own identity! Do you recognise this handwriting, madam? The individual who penned that letter is now living at Milan, whatever you may be pleased to say to the contrary!" retorted Mr Braddyll, with a sneer, as he laid a letter before Mrs Beaufort.

The colour gathered quickly in her cheeks; and she

appeared oppressed with a load of anxiety and foreboding : but her indomitable pride and resolution of character upheld her. She recognised the small, even, Italian handwriting, as Gasparo Marescotti's ! The letter was dated from Milan, and had only been written a few weeks back. It contained only about four lines ; which, as Mr Braddyll held the letter before her, Mrs Beaufort's eye rapidly glanced over. Without alluding in any way to his wife, Marescotti merely announced his arrival at Milan ; and then the letter abruptly concluded with a few observations on a visit he had recently paid to some of Mr Braddyll's relatives.

Mr Braddyll carefully folded the letter, and put it into his pocket, as Mrs Beaufort averted her head ; then he turned, and triumphantly contemplated the now sinking figure of her who had before so sternly defied him. Mrs Beaufort's head drooped ; and the quivering and contraction of her high broad forehead, showed how great was her mental torture. Mr Braddyll spoke not ; determined to allow the revelation he had made to work its full effect on her mind : but he sat revelling in the anguish he beheld, and anticipating the consummation of his designs. At length

Mrs Beaufort raised her head. There was mingled dread, hatred, and suspicion, in the glance of her proud eyes, as she slowly turned them upon him.

"I demand to see that letter again, otherwise our conference is at an end, and I refuse longer to treat with you. You depart to do your worst, and I ——" she paused, menacingly.

"Certainly ; nothing can be more desirable than that no doubt of the truth of my assertions should remain on your mind, madam," replied Mr Braddyll, with apparent courtesy, after a pause, again holding the letter open before her.

"Give me the letter into my own hand, Mark Braddyll. Doubts remain : it will be more profitable for you to have them dissipated !" exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, suddenly grasping the letter ; which she retained so firmly, that without tearing the paper in two, a sacrifice Mr Braddyll was not prepared to make, he could not repossess himself of it.

Whilst she spoke, Mrs Beaufort's finger wandered along the carved moulding of the writing table against which they sat. Mr Braddyll, therefore, had no sooner relinquished his hold of the letter, than, with the quickness of thought, a small drawer sprang open, into which Mrs Beaufort hastily flung the let-

ter ; and, before her tormentor could interpose, the snap with which the drawer closed convinced him that any attempt to regain possession of it would be fruitless. His eyes glared fiercely, especially when he marked the derisive smile on Mrs Beaufort's lip, at having so cleverly outwitted him.

"I shall carefully examine Gasparo Marescotti's letter, and take measures accordingly," said she haughtily. "You have urged me to this. Not content with availing yourself of the power which this secret, the bane of my existence, gives you to live a pensioner on my bounty for the last two years, you have outraged me by most cruel taunts. No tyrant could have tortured with keener or more refined malice than you have done. This shall end ! Yet know," continued Mrs Beaufort, with rising agitation, "so much do I dread the world's comments, and that indiscriminate scorn it unsparingly deals, without distinction or extenuation, that I would gladly purchase oblivion and secrecy at any cost, save that of my child's happiness. Once I would have given Ginevra to you ; thankful that the secret of my weak compliance with your uncle's villany could be thus for ever concealed. It was pride and the fear of the world's censure which then ensnared me : it has also

been that which so long induced me to succumb to your designs. If it be true, as you say, that Gasparo Marescotti still lives, his rights, as you call them, will never be admitted by me until every legal measure shall have failed ; and then, whilst I live, he will never enter the Abbey doors as its master !” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort vehemently, all her energy returning.

Mr Braddyll looked at her flashing eye and resolute deportment. The avowal he had made seemed to work the very opposite effect to that he intended : it had roused Mrs Beaufort’s passions, and, above all, her fears ; and he trembled for what, in the vehemence of her indignation, she might be betrayed into.

“ Promise me Ginevra’s hand, and I will serve you in any way you command. You know that I am fiery and hot-tempered, as my uncle : our Italian blood cannot brook contradiction ; but believe me, Mrs Beaufort, I am not so ungrateful for past favours as you imagine. It is as much your interest as mine to avoid an open contest. You engaged to bestow upon me Margaret Desmond’s hand ; in lieu of that I ask for your daughter’s—then the papers in my possession are your own ! ”

"It is too late now, Mark Braddyll, to dictate terms to me. You have led me to believe that Gasparo Marescotti lives ; and whilst those ties between us subsist which he fraudulently obtained, Europe is too small to hold us both. I do not wish to converse longer with you,—my resolution is irrevocably taken," replied Mrs Beaufort, indignantly.

"And you will immediately proclaim Ginevra's birth, and acknowledge her as your heiress, without any respect to my demands?" asked Mr Braddyll, while his lips grew white with suppressed rage.

"I will! Twenty-four hours shall not elapse ere I do her justice ; even were Gasparo Marescotti on the threshold!"

"I counsel you to think twice ere you venture upon such a step. If you do, in the face of your friends, madam, I will then immediately depose you from your authority here ; by virtue of the commission I hold from Gasparo Marescotti to personate him, and to act in his name at Methwold, in case of any such contingency, until he arrives in England!" retorted Mr Braddyll, insolently.

"Try! Do your worst! But leave me!" rejoined Mrs Beaufort, contemptuously.

“ You appear to doubt my assertion that the Chevalier Marescotti lives. All your researches to discover him will be vain : he has left Milan again. Proud, wayward woman, learn that your fate is in my hands : I alone know the secret of your husband’s disappearance. Give me Ginevra,—on this condition her father renews his promise to molest you no more. Refuse me her hand,—and, armed with lawful authority, your husband will appear to assert his legal rights ; and then we shall see whose will prevails ! ”

“ If my child could be induced to bestow herself upon you—if she would not consider death a joyful boon in comparison to becoming the wife of an unprincipled villain like yourself—my bitterest malediction should be upon her ! ” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort violently : then, as if suddenly recovering her self-possession, she seated herself calmly, and not a single word more during that interview escaped her lips.

In silent sternness, though with glittering eye, Mrs Beaufort listened to Mr Braddyll’s wrathful threats. Not a single question would she answer ; and no accusation, however cutting or false, did she condescend to refute. She sat with her elbow

resting on the table, expressing, by looks only, the contempt she felt.

At last Mr Braddyll quitted the room ; announcing his intention of returning after an interval of two hours, to receive Mrs Beaufort's final determination on the compromise he proposed.

CHAPTER VII.

As soon as Mr Braddyll was gone, Mrs Beaufort rose, locked the door, and prepared for action. Alone, then, in silence and solitude, it might have been thought that her woman's nature would have yielded beneath the excitement and anguish of her recent interview ; but in no outpouring of grief did she indulge. Her step was slow and deliberate, as she crossed the room, and opened her writing-case ; and stern resolve shone in her eye as she took Gasparo Marescotti's letter from the drawer, and spread it wide open on the table. She next drew a sheet of paper before her, dipped a pen in the ink, and held it suspended for some minutes over the paper. Then, with a look of intense anguish, she rose, swept her hand over her brow, and, approaching the window, eagerly drew

back the muslin blinds, as the fresh wind fanned her cheek.

Much had there been in that silent, proud woman's life to nourish, though not to excuse, the melancholy and morose loneliness of her existence. At an early age, disappointment the most bitter had seared her heart, and crushed for ever the prospect of a happy future. From that period, the external advantages of her position, and the blameless, lofty rectitude of her deportment in the world's eye, became her idols. Happiness had fled for ever ; and, feeling herself doubly injured, doubly betrayed by those whom she had implicitly trusted, no icy barrier could be more chill or impenetrable than that which Agatha Beaufort erected round her heart : from thenceforth sceptical, untouched or softened, in the slightest degree, by the adulation of the world. This feeling of bitter distrust and irony increased to a fearful degree the pride and reserve of her character. To no human being did she impart the secret that had blighted her happiness : for, far too haughty was her spirit to allow it to be supposed that adversity encircled her ; or, that her lot in life was not the brilliant, prosperous, and privileged one it seemed to be.

To preserve this fatal secret, after a dire chance

placed it in the power of one whose threatened, unscrupulous use of it she had reason to dread, Agatha Beaufort sacrificed everything ; and, in an evil moment, consented to that which, partly from the same actuating motives of intense family pride, converted every act of her after-life into a lie, and imbittered her existence with deadly remorse and self-reproach.

From an early age, Miss Beaufort had imbibed the deepest and most ardent attachment for her cousin, Francis Desmond. Living under the same roof, constantly associating as companions, and partaking in the same joys and sorrows, she had learned to love him with the whole strength and fervour of her passionate nature. Little, however, did Mr Desmond imagine that the homage he habitually offered to his beautiful cousin and companion was received by her with a secret thrill of exultation and hope ; or that an unkind word, or even the smallest slight on his part, was sufficient to wring tears from those proud eyes : which, to others, looked too brilliant to be dimmed by grief.

And yet Mr Desmond was not totally ignorant of the influence he possessed : he knew that his slightest wish or request was more powerful than aught else in the world to win compliance from his cousin Agatha.

During his college days, and afterwards, when anything took him away from the Abbey for any lengthened period, he had marked, also, the tremulous quivering of her full, round lip as he bade her farewell; and the sparkling animation of her lovely face while welcoming his return home again. Doubtless, had Mr Desmond shared the intensity of his cousin's feelings, he would have been more quick-sighted to detect, and turn to advantage, these indications of her interest in him.

But the truth was, that he had never presumed to think of Miss Beaufort in the light of his future wife. Though perfectly appreciating and admiring her great mental and personal endowments, there was something in the masculine vigour and independence of his cousin's mind, which jarred upon Mr Desmond's notions of feminine gentleness and trustful reliance. Her manner always testified too plainly that, though she frequently claimed his aid and protection, and associated him in all her employments and pursuits, it was more because her fancy, and perhaps a capricious affection at the moment, prompted her to do so, and not that she found his help absolutely necessary: in short, Mr Desmond perceived that his beautiful companion could think, act, and speak for herself, totally independent of his assistance.

Very soon the unpleasant fact also revealed itself, that it was she who possessed the master mind; while the deep thought, the haughty self-will, and resolute determination which at times shone in Agatha's brilliant eyes, were far removed from the characteristics of the gentle, loving, and obedient wife he had pictured to himself as requisite to his future happiness. Then the pride of birth and position, which formed so essential an ingredient in Miss Beaufort's character, had also their due effect in alienating her cousin's heart from her, on the terms she alone cared to possess it. Although her favour enabled Mr Desmond to overstep the circle her exclusive spirit had drawn, he dared not peril his happiness on this precarious chance: he remembered, and in his heart bitterly resented, the persecution and slights his father had endured, for having won the heart of one of Sir John's four slenderly portioned sisters. In what spirit was it, therefore, probable that Sir John Beaufort would receive his proposals for the hand of his only daughter? for, since her brother's departure for India, Agatha had become still more precious in her father's eyes, as, perhaps, the future representative of his house.

Miss Beaufort, meanwhile, feeling sure of her cousin's attachment, and concluding that his reserve

arose from a consciousness of poverty, and the inadequate position he had to offer, which made him reluctant to peril the friendly intercourse subsisting between them by proposing to her, avowed her wishes to her father by letter ; taking good care to intimate, that any opposition to her will, on his part, would be useless ; and suggesting her desire that Sir John should avail himself of an early opportunity, delicately to hint to his nephew that such an alliance would not be disagreeable to him. Sir John was astonished beyond measure ; and demurred seriously, on the ground of Mr Desmond's slender prospects, and want of position. A great deal of correspondence passed between the father and the daughter on the subject ; until, at length, finding Agatha's resolute will proof against remonstrance or persuasion, Sir John finally conceded the point ; on condition that one year elapsed ere any steps were taken on his part to remove Mr Desmond's very natural scruples, should he not propose, of his own accord, during the interval.

It was just before the arrival of the Sullivans at Methwold, that this arrangement was concluded between the determined Agatha and her father. Several months afterwards, under seal of the strictest confidence, Miss Beaufort imparted to her chosen friend,

Agnes Sullivan, the sentiments and hopes that animated her heart for her cousin ; though she refrained from confiding the means she had taken to secure her father's acquiescence to their future union. Daily the unsuspecting Agatha drew closer the bond of friendship, which united her to Miss Sullivan, in whom she placed implicit trust. Bitter was the remorse and consternation of Agnes, when, after a time, she felt that each visit she paid to the Abbey was a betrayal of the friend whose sole exertions and kindness had raised her again to comparative affluence. She had not courage to extinguish Mr Desmond's hopes by one straightforward and honourable step ; or to disregard, for the sake of her friend and benefactress, those vehement protestations of affection, which met with so warm a response in her own heart. During the progress of her attachment, every fresh mark of favour lavished upon her by Miss Beaufort, inflicted excruciating agony on Agnes ; and her cheeks kindled with shame and remorse, when, from time to time, her unsuspecting friend confided her schemes for the future : in which her love for her cousin, his supposed return of it, and her own consequent happiness, were defined in glowing terms. Agnes felt the treachery of her conduct ; yet she lacked strength of principle and

moral rectitude, to withstand the keen temptation, and to withdraw herself for a time from Mr Desmond's society; in order to repair, if possible, the involuntary wrong she had, in the first instance, inflicted on her friend.

Miss Beaufort, in the meantime, was totally unconscious that Agnes had thus insidiously frustrated her hopes; until her suspicion was aroused by a few words accidentally dropped, in the heat of an altercation between herself and Basil Sullivan, which terminated in the banishment of the latter from the Abbey. While in Agatha's presence, Agnes had good reason carefully to suppress the slightest indication of the secret intelligence existing between herself and Francis Desmond; and the latter, uncomfortably conscious that his union with Miss Sullivan would be regarded with displeasure by his relatives, was well content to hide his intentions from them, until his future plans were more matured. Absorbed, also, as Agatha just then was, in curious speculations on Mr Basil Sullivan's character—whose strange conversations and theories she delighted to relate, in her playful, witty manner, to her cousin, during their frequent evening rambles together—every facility was thus given to the lovers

to meet and converse, without exciting suspicion in Miss Beaufort's mind. Agnes, though she implored her lover with tears, and a pertinacity perfectly incomprehensible to him, to avow whether his affections were hers alone, or whether his heart had been susceptible of the slightest attachment before knowing her; on receiving what she considered satisfactory answers to these questions, had honour enough to preserve, with inviolate fidelity, her friend's secret; and both then, and to her dying day, Mrs Desmond never disclosed it to her husband.

Francis Desmond's marriage was a blow which bowed Miss Beaufort's proud spirit to the earth. For days and nights after his departure from the Abbey, with none to watch beside her save her faithful Cartaret, the mental anguish which tortured the unhappy girl defies description. Sorrow for her cousin's defection, despair at the contemplation of her future fate, and indignation at the treachery practised upon her by her friend, agitated her mind almost to a pitch of frenzy. From the moment, however, Agatha received Mr Desmond's letter, announcing that his marriage with Agnes Sullivan was accomplished, a change came over her deportment. An unnatural composure replaced those violent bursts

of agony, which made Cartaret even tremble to behold: she shed no more tears; for the fiery vehemence of her past grief had dried their fountain, and blighted for ever the kindly and sunny impulses of her heart. From thenceforwards Agatha Beaufort became the cold, stern, implacable woman: injured, as she thought she was, by the world, she repaid back what she had suffered with a tenfold vehemence of contempt. Her love for Francis Desmond converted itself into abhorrence; her scorn for his wife exceeded her indignation. And thus for a long time Miss Beaufort lived on, tolerating the world, and misjudged by it; until the period arrived when her hand was sought in marriage by Sir Henry Somerton's son. It was not Mr Somerton's want of fortune, as the world imagined, but the total impossibility she felt to bring herself to become his wife, which led to her precipitate rejection of his suit at the eleventh hour. Everything connected with this proposal naturally awoke reminiscences of the past in Miss Beaufort's mind: miserable, restless, and dissatisfied, her importunity for change of scene and persons at length induced Sir John to break up his establishment, and settle in Rome.

Miss Beaufort, after a time, appeared to derive

visible benefit from her father's sacrifice : her health improved. Her character, however, unfolded itself not again ; and her frigid indifference in society was such that not one of her new friends could find words sufficiently expressive of their wonder at the extraordinary phlegm and insensibility displayed by the lovely young Englishwoman. But a change was again approaching in Agatha's destiny—one that augmented, if possible, the bitterness of her lot.

Amongst the persons composing Sir John Beaufort's household, the most privileged and conspicuous was his secretary and interpreter, Gasparo Marescotti. Marescotti had been highly recommended to Sir John, for talent and industry ; both of which qualities combined, had raised him from a comparatively inferior condition in life, to one of affluence and honour. To a face and figure of faultless beauty, Marescotti united the most insinuating manners and address. He was ambitious, and an adept in that craft and subtilty likely to achieve his purpose ; while possessing an energy and resolution which never lost a favourable moment, however difficult the juncture, to advance his designs.

Marescotti, whose manners, information, and vivacity, procured him admission at all times to Sir

John's domestic circle (if such the drawing-room could be called over which the silent, haughty Agatha presided) was instantly attracted by Miss Beaufort's lovely face. After he had been a few times in her company, his resolution was taken : he also, but secretly, would enrol himself in the list of her suitors ; and though incomparably the most insignificant of them all, the eyes of the handsome Italian flashed as he triumphantly foresaw his eventual success. Her beauty, her wealth, and her rank, were worthy of the arduous effort.

Far different from the rough, honest sincerity of Basil Sullivan, when striving for the same prize, was the way in which the wily Marescotti set about accomplishing his design. His first and preliminary step was, with persevering and daily assiduity, to ingratiate himself with his patron's beautiful daughter. Noiselessly he appeared to haunt her, wherever she went ; he unfolded the resources of his well-cultivated mind, to attract her attention, and while away pleasantly many hours which Agatha otherwise would have spent in listless ennui. No disdain daunted him ; no petulance or neglect offended ; and always, in spite of herself, the supple-minded Italian continued to interest Miss Beaufort. Meanwhile he was no less in-

dustriously, and with a degree of dexterous cunning perfectly marvellous, seeking to avail himself of the secret depression weighing upon her spirit—the cause of which an extraordinary chance had revealed to him—in order to convert that knowledge to the furtherance of his designs.

It so happened, that soon after Marescotti conceived the bold scheme to raise himself thus to rank and opulence, Sir John intrusted to his secretary, in whom he placed perfect confidence, the arrangement of a coffer full of letters, leases, and a variety of similar documents; which he had brought from the Abbey, and had never opened since his departure thence. Amongst the letters, tied up in a separate bundle, were copies of the whole of Sir John's correspondence with his daughter on the subject of her attachment to Mr Desmond, and Agatha's very vehement replies. Sir John had assured his daughter, in the most positive terms, that every word which passed between them on the subject had been burnt by him. Such, in reality, had been his original intention; instead of which, in one of his careless moods, Sir John had unknowingly thrown the letters, with other papers, into this trunk, that he seldom opened; and as he never afterwards found a vestige of them in his desk

or private cabinet, he firmly believed that he had destroyed them; according to his solemn promise, and the constant injunctions Agatha took the precaution to append to every letter she wrote on the subject.

This discovery threw the unprincipled Marescotti into transports of joy. He immediately saw his advantage; though he did not at first realize the vast power this knowledge would give him over the haughty Agatha. His first act was to abstract the packet: his next, to take exact copies of the letters; the originals he then forwarded, carefully sealed up, to his sister, Madame Alberghini, with strict injunctions to her to disclaim all knowledge of any such documents, should inquiry be hereafter instituted. Possessed of this important secret, gradually the truth dawned on the clever Italian's mind of the power his discovery gave him: he marked the almost imperceptible shudder, the increasing paleness of her cheek, and the agonized doubt and inquiry of the look bent upon him by Agatha, whenever, in his most insinuating tones, he uttered those dark innuendoes, skillfully intended to probe her to the soul.

At length one evening, some months after his discovery, Gasparo Marescotti, thinking his schemes

matured, threw himself at Miss Beaufort's feet, and boldly confessed the love he bore her. It was on the eve of an intensely hot day ; the deep blue sky was spangled with stars, so thickly, that they seemed almost to connect themselves into a bright curtain of subdued light before it. Agatha was reclining alone, as usual, on a divan in a summer-house in the garden ; yielding to her wayward thoughts. She listened until Marescotti concluded his passionate appeal : then, with that quiet irony so habitual on her lips, she bade him for ever dismiss the presumptuous hope, and return to his duties as her father's hired secretary, to seek in due time a partner in his own humble sphere in life.

The eyes of the Italian gleamed with passionate vehemence : he again declared his love ; but this time threats mingled with its avowal, filling the haughty Agatha with despair and dismay. Unless his silence was purchased by the gift of her hand, Marescotti swore to spread the secret of her disappointed love far and wide ; and not only to do this, but also to enclose the whole correspondence stolen from her father to Mr Desmond. In confirmation of his ability to put his threat into execution, Marescotti spread before Agatha the copies of the letters he had made.

It was a terrible moment for Miss Beaufort: fear, shame, and revenge, by turns agitated her, as she looked on the pale, resolute face of the handsome Italian, still kneeling submissively at her feet. She saw that his subtle villany must be met, if combated at all, by dissimulation on her part equal to his own. Her experience, besides, had taught her greater self-command than she possessed at the period when she drove Basil Sullivan so imperiously from her presence. Marescotti, however, perceived the inward struggle; and as words, at length, fell from her parched lips, and she requested a day to deliberate ere returning an answer, with slow, determined emphasis, he recapitulated his designs; and finally demanded, as a proof of her sincerity, that three days thence a secret marriage, according to the Romish ritual, should unite them, before the affair was revealed to Sir John; when, on leaving the altar, he promised to restore the stolen letters. Instead of the burst of passionate indignation, which Marescotti expected would surely follow this audacious proposal, Miss Beaufort listened, apparently unmoved. Her only remark was expressive of a doubt whether this design could be executed; then, with clever tact, assuming her assent to the marriage given, she pro-

ceeded to discuss the details of the plan. The chapel belonging to the Benedictine Monastery was the place boldly assigned by Marescotti for the solemnization of the secret rite, as his brother was one of the priests attached. Miss Beaufort listened: the obscurity now partially concealed her beautiful face; then suffering Marescotti to kiss her hand, she promised to meet him the following evening in the same place, to inform him of her final determination.

Punctually at the hour appointed, Miss Beaufort, on the following evening, was at the place of rendezvous: this time, however, she came closely attended by her maid Cartaret. Her words were few, but expressed that which filled the heart of Gasparo Marescotti with triumphant exultation. On condition that Marescotti restored the letters immediately on the conclusion of the ceremony, and before she quitted the chapel, and that she herself was permitted to choose the officiating priest, Miss Beaufort consented to the secret marriage at the time he proposed—about dawn on the morning but one following. Enraptured at finding his ambitious project successful beyond his most sanguine hopes, Marescotti unhesitatingly assented to both proposals; then Miss Beaufort and her now affianced husband parted:

apparently in the firmest confidence in each other's sincerity.

The following day Miss Beaufort remained closely closeted in her apartments; visible to no one. To regain *quiet* possession of the letters—which, if published, would so cruelly expose her to her cousin Francis Desmond, and display the motive of the persecuting spirit with which she had resented his union with her rival; besides humiliating her in the world's esteem, as one whose hand had been scorned and rejected—Agatha resolved to meet fraud by fraud, and perilously determined on staking her woman's ingenuity and daring, against the machinations of the shrewd, crafty Italian: whom she fancied her artifices had already deceived.

It so chanced that, during the period Miss Beaufort and her father resided in Paris, an old Carmelite friar, on a pilgrimage to collect alms for the rebuilding of his convent, accidentally in part burnt to the ground, had frequently been the object of their charity. This individual Miss Beaufort had recently recognised again in Rome, at a religious ceremony at which she was present; and instantly her daring spirit singled him out as a person suitable in every way to abet her present design. Accordingly,

at nightfall the friar was introduced into her apartments, with the utmost secrecy and caution, by Cartaret ; who herself traced out his abode, and gave him instructions how to conduct himself while in her mistress's presence : hinting that his services were urgently required, and that money sufficient to repair the monastery would at once be liberally given, provided he acquitted himself to the satisfaction of his employer.

Having first exacted an oath of secrecy, Miss Beaufort then proceeded to inform the astonished monk that he would be required to present himself between the hours of four and five o'clock the following morning, arrayed in priestly vestments, at the chapel of the Benedictine Monastery ; apparently to solemnize a marriage between parties, whose names, for various reasons, it was desirable to suppress. In consideration of this service, and a promise that, immediately on the conclusion of the mock ceremony, he would quit Rome, Miss Beaufort offered him a bribe of three hundred pounds ; half of which sum was to be immediately paid down, the remainder when the service was accomplished. The old monk hesitated at first, as well he might : for what he was required to do was sacrilegiously to desecrate one of the sacraments of his church ; however, after some in-

ward demur, acting on the principle that the benefit to the community, resulting from the profane act, would easily purchase absolution for it from his prior, he consented. Wisely, therefore, refraining from asking further questions, he took a solemn vow to await the pair at the time the lady indicated. Cartaret then reconducted the astonished friar, with the same precautions as before; and, dismissing him to make the necessary preparations, returned to her triumphant mistress.

Gasparo Marescotti, however, was on the alert. Miss Beaufort over-acted her part: she had too readily acquiesced in his designs not to raise misgiving and suspicion in his mind. With stealthy cunning he had tracked out all Cartaret's movements; and the old friar had scarcely crept cautiously back to his humble lodging in the suburbs of the city, after his mysterious interview with Miss Beaufort, when Marescotti stood before him. For some time the monk bravely withstood Gasparo's threats, and inexorably refused to divulge the trust reposed in him; nor did his resolution fail until Marescotti, in more inviting tones than he had at first assumed, offered to double the bribe bestowed by Miss Beaufort; and, moreover, to pay down the money instantly: an engagement he was fully enabled to per-

form, inasmuch as, before setting out, he had taken the liberty of borrowing a considerable sum from Sir John Beaufort: probably on the strength of the near connexion about to unite them. As the interest of his monastery was the sole point on which the friar could reconcile it to his conscience to share at all in the nefarious deed, this argument, therefore, was unanswerable; and soon Marescotti was in possession of every word and instruction given by Miss Beaufort to frustrate his project. His counter-plot was rapidly imparted, and the monk—under fear of the gravest ecclesiastical censures, unremitted by the gold which his perseverance in the fraud would pour into the monastic treasury—dare not refuse compliance. In three hours afterwards he therefore found himself, accompanied by Marescotti, who never lost sight of him, in the sacristy of the chapel of the Benedictines, awaiting Miss Beaufort's arrival.

Daylight had scarcely broken, and spread a faint rosy gleam over the heavens, when Agatha, enveloped from head to foot in a large cloak, and exulting in the assured success of her daring scheme, stole from her father's mansion, attended by Cartaret. After traversing a few lone streets, they reached the Benedictine church. Cartaret remained within its porch

to watch, while Miss Beaufort entered with Marescotti; who eagerly awaited his victim. The chapel was very dark; and a thick curtain excluded even the faint rays of light streaming down on the altar from the richly painted window. Two or three dusky forms were gliding with noiseless step about the aisles: witnesses of the ceremony about to be performed, as Marescotti murmured hastily, in reply to Miss Beaufort's startled glance. On reaching the altar, a priest fully robed received the pair.

Agatha raised her veil, and took a long and deliberate survey of the ecclesiastic's face; in which she recognised the shrivelled, sun-burnt features of the Carmelite monk. A bitter smile parted her beautiful lips; then, letting her veil drop again, she signed for the ceremony to proceed. The opening part passed swiftly, and with as many curtailments as the rubric permitted; and soon came the momentous period when she was to plight her vows to Gasparo Marescotti. Shuddering dismay, despite her iron resolution, then overpowered Miss Beaufort. The very act seemed blasphemous and horrible, to kneel before the altar and call upon God to witness vows that she knew she was about deliberately to violate; and the earthly recognition of which also she had taken effectual measures, as she

thought, to prevent, by her artful substitution of a simple friar, devoid of spiritual authority, in the room of the consecrated priest.

The obscurity round the altar during the progress of the service had gradually deepened than otherwise ; and so excited and abstracted were Miss Beaufort's feelings, that she perceived not that, silently and dexterously, another priest, hitherto hidden amidst the dark, heavy draperies at the back of the altar, had glided into the place before occupied by her own disguised agent. He was about the same height, and not dissimilar in appearance ; and in the same monotonous, almost whispered accents, he proceeded with the ceremony. Once Miss Beaufort raised her eyes suspiciously ; but immediately bent them to the ground again, so slight was the difference of voice : satisfied, also, since she perceived but one officiating priest as before. From thenceforth, until the last concluding words of the ceremony, Agatha, to avoid meeting Marescotti's glance, kept her eyes rigidly fixed on the ground ; she then turned and bestowed one long gaze on the altar, upon which a bright light now streamed. The friar alone, in his borrowed vestments, stood before it : a mocking, triumphant smile curled Agatha's haughty lip as she looked

on her handsome bridegroom. Gasparo advanced, and put a sealed packet into her hand; then, so suddenly that she had no time to object, he led her into the vestry, where several of his friends intrusted with the secret, awaited them.

Language could feebly paint the rage, violence, and consternation of the unfortunate Agatha in the scene which ensued; when, in a very few words, her husband, and the true priest, — Marescotti's brother, — who had received their vows, explained the real state of the case, backed by the avowal of her own unfaithful agent, the friar; and she found that she had been cajoled into a real marriage with the crafty secretary. In spite of her vehement protestations, the priest proceeded to register the marriage in the usual way, appending the signatures of the witnesses; a certificate of which, signed by himself, he delivered into the hands of the triumphant Marescotti.

Had Agatha been less self-willed and haughtily independent in character, she might still perhaps have been saved, by a timely appeal to her father, from the future misery resulting from her rash and daring attempt to foil Marescotti's manœuvres. As it was, she quitted the church nearly stupified with

rage and grief; trembling at her father's indignation when he should learn into what a strait she had been duped; and frantic at the bare imagination of the exposure and disgrace consequent upon any attempt on his part to set aside the tie which bound her to Gasparo Marescotti.

Fearful were the transports of fury and despair which convulsed Miss Beaufort's mind, on regaining the privacy of her own apartment. The anticipated disgrace, and the satirical comments she would be exposed to from all the wits in Rome, when her extraordinary adventure was published, goaded her nearly to distraction. The only consolation she had, and it was a bitter one, was to commit to the flames that correspondence which had cost her so dear.

Sir John Beaufort, in the meantime, after fruitlessly seeking an interview with Agatha, set off, accompanied by his secretary, Marescotti, on a short tour of ten days, that he had long projected; but which Miss Beaufort, in the bewilderment of her sorrow, had forgotten. Nothing could be more favourable to Marescotti's schemes, than Sir John's temporary absence. It gave time for the impulsive violence of Agatha's temper to cool down; and upon reflection, he trusted that she would, perhaps, prefer

putting the best face on a bad matter ; which could only be remedied at a cost involving so humiliating an exposure, and by an admission so galling and mortifying to the pride of the haughty Agatha, as that she had been cleverly entrapped into a marriage with her inferior.

In some degree Marescotti's calculation was realized. On his return to Rome, after a week's absence with Sir John, he was received with haughty, sullen resentment by his angry and unwilling bride. Nothing at first could be more submissive and humble than the handsome secretary's deportment ; or more assiduous and untiring than his efforts to obtain her forgiveness for the deceptive part he had played : which he attributed to his deep attachment, and his despair at ever winning a hand refused to so many others, his superiors in rank. Agatha listened ; but all Marescotti's pleadings failed to shake, or mitigate her deep unappeasable thirst for vengeance ; which was restrained only by the degradation its indulgence would inflict upon herself.

For six weary months her life dragged on in this miserable manner : Agatha firmly and haughtily refusing to conceal from her father the culpable

coercion by which Marescotti had obtained her hand, and to ask his consent and forgiveness of her union with him, on the plea of a mutual attachment; yet, not daring boldly to encounter Sir John's wrath, or the public exposure which must ensue, were she to demand summary vengeance for the trick practised upon her.

At length Agatha's situation rendered it impossible longer to conceal the important secret from Sir John. Then all Miss Beaufort's shuddering anticipations of her father's wrath fell short of the reality of Sir John's fury and dismay. Forgetful of Agatha's precarious health, he heaped upon her reproaches; mingled with the bitterest invectives for her folly, and the disgrace she had brought on the family. Agatha for once, both trembling and subdued, implored her father's pardon and protection, and entreated him to save her, even at this late hour, from Marescotti's power; declaring that nothing should ever compel her publicly to acknowledge her marriage: nor did she forget to point out to Sir John, that it was his own careless disregard of his promise to destroy her letters relating to Francis Desmond which had led to her present misery.

Just when the confusion and violent altercation

had reached their climax within Sir John Beaufort's palazzo, Agatha received her cousin Francis Desmond's letter, entreating for assistance; enclosing also another written by Agnes, from her dying bed, to her former friend. In it, Mrs Desmond humbly acknowledged the disingenuousness of her past conduct, for which she earnestly besought forgiveness; and detailed, in touching language, her past daily sufferings, when she saw her beloved husband's spirit and energy yielding before the inroads of poverty and anxiety, and found that her love was no longer able to compensate to him for the loss of all things. At such times, Agnes stated, bitter was her remorse, when she thought of the brilliant destiny of which she had been the means of depriving him. Mrs Desmond then proceeded to supplicate Miss Beaufort to receive her cousin again into favour; to pardon the past, and then, in due time, to restore happiness to him, by becoming his wife. Agnes concluded her long letter by commending her expected infant child, if it survived, to her former friend's love and protection.

Agatha's feelings, on receiving this letter, may be better imagined than described. Soon, however, her own immediate position absorbed all her energies, and her cousin's letter was left unanswered: for still

the deepest resentment against him for his neglect of her, and preference of another, rankled in her heart. Mrs Desmond's appeal she carefully laid aside, for future consideration.

Meanwhile, Sir John Beaufort's measures were vigorous and prompt. Determined to separate his daughter from her unworthy husband—yet, at the same time, careful of her honour—he resolved, first, to have the ceremony of her marriage with Marescotti solemnized again in his own presence, in accordance with the Protestant ritual. Accordingly, much to her amazement, Agatha, who now, banished from her indignant father's presence, lived in her own apartments, received a sudden summons to appear before him. On her obedience, she found everything prepared for the second ceremony; to which, with aching heart, she was forced to submit.

Throughout, Marescotti—spurned by his haughty wife, and reviled, as he justly deserved, by her father—conducted himself with singular tact and firmness. He had obtained the aim of his ambition; therefore, he thought he could well afford to listen composedly to reproaches which must end in his final triumph over both. He miscalculated, however, the unrelenting hostility of Sir John, and the power

possessed by the wealthy and influential Englishman. Assiduously abetted by Agatha—who betrayed to her father the fact heedlessly acknowledged by Marescotti, in the heat of their first altercation, that he had taken from Sir John's desk the sum with which he bribed the monk—the incensed baronet, after ascertaining the truth of the accusation, lodged a secret information against his secretary, charging him with the theft. The horrors of an Italian prison—where the gold and influence of Sir John Beaufort might procure, for aught he knew, his perpetual detention—first shook Marescotti's obstinate resolve; for he possessed sufficient insight into the character of the stern old man to be persuaded that no consideration, save the acceptance of the alternative he offered, would prevent him from fulfilling his threat to the uttermost. Already, whenever he stirred abroad, Marescotti perceived that his movements were watched, and his steps dodged, by emissaries commissioned to arrest him, if he attempted to leave the precincts of the city. In vain he tried to vanquish his wife's repugnance, and win her to a more gentle mood. Agatha turned from him coldly and inexorably; and, with freezing scorn, refused to be conciliated. It should be stated, however, that from the

time when Sir John became possessed of the knowledge that his secretary had robbed him to so large an amount, he totally ceased apprising Agatha of his designs relative to her husband.

One morning, about a week after this discovery, Sir John entered his daughter's apartment, and with a brow black as thunder, laid a paper before her, which he commanded her to sign. It was a document by which Agatha Marescotti granted free power and liberty to her husband Gasparo, to dispose of himself in any lawful way he thought proper, without regard or reference to the conjugal tie subsisting between them. Agatha unhesitatingly assented: two witnesses were instantly summoned by Sir John, whom his daughter recognised to be ecclesiastics of distinguished rank, as she frequently met them in society; and in their presence she subscribed the document.

Sir John, when they were alone, then sternly informed Agatha, that from that day forwards she would neither hear nor see anything more of Gasparo Marescotti; but as a just retribution and punishment for the offence she had committed, all explanation as to his fate, and the means by which the separation had been effected, would be concealed from her.

From that day—to the period when, as Mrs Beau-

fort, Agatha cowered under the taunts of Marescotti's nephew, Mark Braddyll—she never heard tidings of her husband. Vainly Agatha supplicated her father to remove the load of intolerable anxiety and suspense which preyed upon her mind: Sir John ever sternly repulsed her prayer. After her brother's decease, when Agatha reigned omnipotent mistress of Methwold Abbey, fruitless was the rigid search which she instituted amongst her father's papers to discover some document relative to this mysterious transaction; for the two ecclesiastics, in whose presence she had signed the documents presented by Sir John, were dead. After a time, she learned from Sir John's confidential solicitor that, some few weeks before his death, her father had forwarded a copy of his will, and other important papers, to Mr Beaufort in India. Agatha, therefore, caused the most diligent inquiries to be made abroad concerning this precious packet; but no tidings could be obtained as to its fate; and it ever remained unknown whether it reached India before her brother's death, or was lost in its passage out.

But to return to the period when we left Agatha and her father at Rome. The day following Marescotti's disappearance, Sir John made instant pre-

paration for his homeward journey. In less than a week they reached Milan; and in this city Ginevra was prematurely born. As soon as Agatha was able to travel, she proceeded on her journey with her father; while Cartaret remained behind, to convey the helpless babe, by Sir John's command, to its aunt, Madame Alberghini, Marescotti's eldest sister: with promise of a yearly payment of sufficient amount to ensure, at once, this lady's secrecy, and care of her infant niece.

For many years afterwards, when the deaths of her father and brother opened a splendid career of worldly prosperity, Agatha Beaufort, a lone, forlorn woman in the midst of her state and power, reflected most bitterly and remorsefully on the part she had played in these early events of her life. Her heart yearned to embrace her child, and she envied Cartaret her yearly journey to Milan, to inquire after it. Uncertain of Marescotti's fate, the pride which had been her bane through life, prevented Mrs Beaufort from sending for her daughter; lest her concession on one point, should involve consequences that she shuddered to contemplate. Ginevra, whose birth had happened amidst such misery and agitation to her mother, was of a weak and feeble con-

stitution, and subject, from the age of five years, to periodical epileptic seizures; yet Cartaret's descriptions of her loveliness and gentle disposition made her mother's heart long to behold her child.

Affairs proceeded thus for some time, when it happened that Mark Braddyll, a son of another of Marescotti's sisters, paid a visit to his aunt, Madame Alberghini. Ginevra's beauty immediately attracted him; and from his aunt he speedily learned enough of her history to be assured that he might turn the information greatly to his own aggrandizement. First, by his artifices he won the heart of the unsuspecting girl; then, armed with the certificate of his uncle's secret marriage in Rome with Miss Beaufort—a document confided to his sister's care by Marescotti, together with copies of all the letters written by Agatha to her father, relative to her desire to bestow her hand on her cousin, the originals of which Gasparo relinquished—and having, moreover, obtained from his aunt several letters addressed to her by her brother (who seemed to have made Madame Alberghini the *confidante* of his intrigues), Mr Braddyll boldly determined upon an expedition to Methwold Abbey.

His first design was to compel Mrs Beaufort to

bestow her daughter's hand upon him, after settling her whole fortune upon Ginevra. During his absence, however, Ginevra was attacked with an unusually severe fit of her malady; thereupon Madame Alberghini wrote to Mr Braddyll, expressing her conviction that her niece's state of health was most precarious, and that she could not long survive these repeated attacks. Without the slightest hesitation, Mr Braddyll, therefore, resolved to break his engagement with the poor girl, and turn his designs on the next heiress in direct succession to the Methwold estates.

Mr Desmond's claims stood first, and after him his daughter Margaret's; but as Mrs Beaufort could bequeath her property absolutely to whom she pleased, Francis Desmond's right offered no impediment to Mr Braddyll's schemes. By skilfully wielding the terrible secret which had blighted her youthful years, Mark Braddyll's empire over Mrs Beaufort soon became omnipotent. He insisted that Margaret Desmond should be summoned to the Abbey; but, first, in order to have a ready antidote, in case of any sudden rebellion on Mrs Beaufort's part, he proposed placing Ginevra previously under her mother's protection. The first demand Mrs Beaufort long hesitated to grant; his second she joyfully acceded to;

but finally, in both cases, Mark Braddyll, by skilfully availing himself of Mr Desmond's request for pecuniary aid, carried his point.

To have admitted of Ginevra's open residence at the Abbey, suited neither Mr Braddyll's nor her mother's projects. To Mrs Beaufort her presence would have been a perpetual source of torturing apprehension. Ginevra's Italian origin must have excited constant and unpleasant speculations in the neighbourhood; especially as her appearance, taken in connexion with Mrs Beaufort's mysterious retirement, and the attachment the latter evinced for her, could not have been plausibly accounted for. Mr Braddyll's reason for insisting upon Ginevra's seclusion was, that her presence would have frustrated his designs on Margaret.

Mrs Beaufort's spacious apartments, communicating, as they did, with the two small rooms situated in one of the towers rising at each extremity of the mansion, were peculiarly adapted for Ginevra's concealment. For years it had been Mrs Beaufort's custom to seclude herself; and frequently, when suffering from unusually severe depression, for days together, seen only by Cartaret, she remained in her apartments: so that, after Ginevra's arrival, it ex-

cited not the slightest surprise in her household, when meals, such as the poor girl alone could partake of, were daily served there ; as Mrs Beaufort, when alone, always lunched privately in her sitting-room.

As soon as Ginevra was fully established in her mysterious seclusion, Mr Braddyll feigned to repent his recent abandonment of her ; and, through Mrs Beaufort, again personally sought to renew his suit. Lowly kneeling at her unknown mother's feet, the apparently dying girl prayed to be spared the trial ; but, whilst watching by her child's pillow, Mrs Beaufort quailed beneath Mark Braddyll's threats, either to betray her secret, or else to force the unfortunate Ginevra from her arms to the altar. By giving a solemn promise to promote his designs on Margaret Desmond, Mrs Beaufort at last saved herself and her sick child from present outrage : and Mark Braddyll's purpose was answered.

Alice Berners, meanwhile, had been invited by Mrs Beaufort to take up her abode at the Abbey. Believing that Ginevra's days were numbered, when Miss Berners first arrived, it had really been Mrs Beaufort's secret intention to bequeath Methwold to her, provided Alice married according to her wishes.

Since her return from the continent, Mrs Beaufort had lived on most friendly terms with her former suitor, now Sir James Somerton, and his wife. Their son, therefore, she now chose for the husband of her future heiress; not doubting but that Leonard Somerton would soon be captivated by Alice's extreme loveliness. Mr Desmond and his daughter she had provided for in her projected will, in accordance with the memorandum surreptitiously abstracted by Lilian Grant from the cabinet.

Little did Mrs Beaufort imagine the tumult of pride and gratified ambition raised in the breast of Alice Berners by her indiscreet hint of a design which circumstances speedily induced her to change. Margaret Desmond's firm, affectionate disposition, her loathing of, and urgent supplications to be preserved from Mr Braddyll's power, to whose assumed attachment the most brilliant offers could not prevail upon her to listen; Ginevra's love for her, and her conquest of Leonard Somerton's heart, so wrought upon Mrs Beaufort, that it softened the bitterness of her resentment against Francis Desmond. Gradually, therefore, the project occurred, and daily gained ascendancy in her mind, to revoke all her favourable intentions towards Alice, whom she did not love, in Margaret's favour;

to defend the latter from Mark Braddyll's designs, and even, if needful, disarm him at the cost of avowing Ginevra's birth. She further seriously designed to bestow Margaret's hand on Leonard Somerton, and to nominate her and her husband joint guardians of Ginevra, should the latter survive herself. In this case, the Beaufort estates were to be Margaret's only at Ginevra's death.

Margaret's supposed treachery, however, and suspected elopement with Mr Compton, completely set aside Mrs Beaufort's generous designs in her favour. But Mr Carnegie's taunts, together with Mark Braddyll's insolent assumptions, decided all wavering relative to her acknowledgment of Ginevra: for so irritated and regardless of the world's censure had Mrs Beaufort become, that, to be revenged on her persecutors, any mortification she might thereby incur weighed as nothing in her esteem; besides, Ginevra's health began slightly to improve, and promised a much longer tenure of life than her mother once imagined possible. But before she introduced Ginevra to the world, Mrs Beaufort anxiously desired to conclude Alice's marriage with Leonard Somerton. Now that Margaret was lost to him for ever, as she believed, she thought Mr

Somerton ought to make amends to Alice ; whose bitter tears for his desertion awoke the profoundest sympathy and compassion in Mrs Beaufort's heart. It was her intention, besides, to portion Alice nobly ; as some compensation for the loss of the splendid expectations which her words had unwittingly led Miss Berners to form.

As Mrs Beaufort leant against the window, all the sorrows of the past seemed concentrated in the bitter anxieties of the present moment : and not the least melancholy of her reflections was, that after all her self-abasement, and the exquisite pain of her proposed avowal, Ginevra's delicate constitution seemed surely to indicate that, as far as she was concerned, it would be made in vain.

At length Mrs Beaufort returned to the table, and rapidly traced a few lines on the paper she had before prepared ; these she folded, and addressed to Mr Carnegie. There was a deep flush on Mrs Beaufort's cheek, and an expression of mingled restraint and defiance on her face, as she disdainfully tossed the note from her. After writing some time longer, she rose, and, with an air of assiduity and haste, most unusual to her, as if she feared to trust herself to think, Mrs Beaufort opened a drawer, and

was soon busily engaged in selecting and laying aside letters and papers from a large packet, which she drew therefrom. After a time the door opened softly, and Ginevra's pretty face appeared; but perceiving that Mrs Beaufort was intently occupied, after throwing a hasty glance round the room, she hastily retreated.

All was silent again in the apartment, the profound stillness only being now and then broken by the sharp rustling of the papers, as Mrs Beaufort turned them over. Suddenly she paused in her employment, for Alice Berners supplicated, earnestly, at the door, for immediate admission to her presence. Mrs Beaufort's pre-occupation was so great, that Alice's step across the adjoining apartment had been unheeded by her. Again Alice spoke: and the piercing entreaty of her tone startled Mrs Beaufort. She closed the drawer and opened the door, intending to inquire the purport of Miss Berners' errand in the adjacent room. Alice, however, sprang wildly past her, and stood, with clasped hands, looking pale as ashes, against the window. Mrs Beaufort gazed at her in silent astonishment and alarm.

Alice shuddered: yet she felt that the worst was

over. Cuthbert Stuart's lips had condemned and spurned her; and this, the bitterest drop in the cup of retribution for her past sin, she had already tasted.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Alice Berners had concluded her humiliating avowal, she stood before Mrs Beaufort, looking pale, though calm; for gradually as she proceeded with her narrative, all excitement appeared to die away. Despair, and the utter hopelessness of her position, seemed to endow her with fearless courage; and nothing did Alice now conceal. Her love for Cuthbert Stuart—which she once imagined she could be content to barter for the splendour that surrounded her at Methwold—and his total and indignant rejection of her hand, when he learned her criminal conduct in respect to Margaret and Mr Somerton,—all were depicted with that glowing fervour so characteristic of Alice's impetuous temperament. The suppression of Captain Stuart's letters, and Lilian Grant's unprincipled device to ruin Margaret in Mrs Beaufort's good opinion, were severally, and emphatically

dwelt upon; and, with bitter shame and remorse, Alice avowed that she had suffered herself to become the dupe of the designing Lilian; who, while professing the deepest concern for her interests, had in fact cunningly availed herself of the towering ambition and revenge working in her heart, to bring about Margaret's banishment.

Aware of Mr Braddyll's designs on Margaret's hand, and the latter's detestation of him, Mrs Beaufort, as she stood in indignant amaze, while the web of villany wrought beneath her roof slowly unravelled itself, was not tardy in comprehending the interest and probable reason Mark Braddyll had in abetting Lilian's abominable scheme. All the slander and intrigue against Margaret now appeared perfectly revealed; and for an instant intense resentment against the suppliant girl, who stood with drooping head and folded hands before her, shone in Mrs Beaufort's eyes.

Alice, however, forestalled her burst of indignant reproach, by announcing in the same cold, determined air, her intention of leaving the Abbey immediately; to return and take up her residence with Mrs Cecil. Mrs Beaufort expostulated, and insisted particularly on the need she had of Alice's

assistance and testimony in bringing the infamous deception home to its perpetrator, Lilian Grant. Still, Alice, while offering every facility a written testimony might afford, or even to confront Lilian before she quitted Mrs Beaufort's presence, firmly refused to pass another night at the Abbey. Vainly Mrs Beaufort menaced, and even entreated; hinting that some great advantage would thereby accrue to Alice, knowing how potent in former days such a lure would have proved; but to her amazement, Miss Berners earnestly reiterated her resolution. Could it indeed be, that the ambitious Alice Berners suddenly renounced the passion which had so fearfully led her astray? Had the pangs of remorse, agitating Alice's heart during the last few weeks, passed slowly in review before Mrs Beaufort, she would no longer have marvelled at her decision, or have striven to combat the undefined dread which warned Alice to flee without delay from temptation. She looked on the tearful, softened glance of those once haughty eyes; and when Alice suddenly knelt, and pressed her trembling lips to Mrs Beaufort's hand, thanking her for past kindnesses, and supplicating her pardon for the ungrateful return she had made; the latter, touched, and perhaps remem-

bering that she also stood in need of indulgence and sympathy, neither turned away, nor withdrew her hand. Fearfully agitated by what she had just heard, Mrs Beaufort stood undecided. Again Alice pressed the hand she clasped to her lips; then, springing from her lowly attitude, abruptly quitted the room.

For several hours afterwards, with burning cheek and furrowed brow, Alice Berners bent over her writing-table. The adjoining apartment was in dire confusion: boxes and articles of attire were scattered about; though, when the labour of Miss Berners' maid was achieved, nothing disfigured the usual luxurious arrangement of the apartment, except that two large trunks, strapped and directed, stood ready for travelling, in the centre of the room. Alice wrote three letters, meanwhile. The first was addressed to Mrs Beaufort, and contained a minute and careful recapitulation of the confession she had volunteered. A few hurried, penitent lines, blistered with tears, Alice sealed, and with trembling hand directed to Mr Somerton. Her third, and longest letter, was for Margaret Desmond. Once more, then, Alice Berners repaired to Mrs Beaufort's apartments, to deliver these letters into her hand.

Mrs Beaufort's manner was grave and dignified,

and her words sorrowful, as she pressed her lips on Alice's agitated brow, and bade her farewell. She spoke not of the change the events of the following day would occasion in her household: she only promised to write to Alice in the course of a few days. The terrible parting of the morning, however, so absorbed every feeling and sensation in Alice's mind, that she noticed not the alteration in Mrs Beaufort's manner; nor the extraordinary moderation with which she refrained from the utterance of those bitter, upbraiding words, and angry threats, even the anticipation of which a few days previously made Alice's heart beat. The single thought, that she was performing Cuthbert Stuart's bidding, sustained Alice, and alone gave her courage to bear the painful humiliation her past jealous violence inflicted. Again Alice quitted Mrs Beaufort's presence; and during the short time that she remained at the Abbey—awaiting the hour when the coach, which was to convey her some miles on her journey, passed the park gates—she impatiently paced up and down her room. Several times Miss Grant sought admittance to her friend's presence; but to her repeated applications Lilian received the same answer, that Miss Berners was engaged.

 Annoyed, and chagrined beyond description,

Lilian retreated, wondering what Alice's mysterious employment could be ; for no foreboding of the coming storm at present disturbed her. Her morning search for Alice through the most frequented parts of the Abbey grounds, and even in some of her favourite haunts in the park, had been in vain. Several cleverly put questions that she addressed to various labourers employed about the grounds, as to whom they had seen pass during the morning, had also been answered very much to Lilian's satisfaction.

Yet, as the evening approached, and still Alice made not her appearance at the dinner-table—while both Mrs Beaufort and Mr Braddyll declined to appear, each from very different motives—a vague, indistinct dread overpowered Lilian's mind as she took her solitary seat at the table : the very servants, she fancied, seemed to glide about the room in a stealthy and mysterious manner. At length the dreary stillness reigning throughout the mansion so oppressed Lilian's spirit, that, chilled and uneasy, she arose, and, after vainly seeking for Mark Braddyll in the library, proceeded to her own apartment. As she passed through the hall, a gust of wind, blowing through an open door at the end of the corridor, agitated her muslin dress. Lilian slightly shivered ;

then, angrily calling a servant, inquired why the door was left open, and ordered it to be closed. The man replied, that Miss Berners, attended by her maid and Mrs Cartaret, had thereby quitted the house, some time previously, to meet the coach at the park gates ; as Miss Berners travelled by it some distance on her road back to Scotland. •

Had the roof suddenly fallen with a crash at her feet, Lilian's gaze of astonishment and dismay could scarcely have been more intense and agonized. For a moment she leaned heavily against the bannisters of the staircase, and her colour wavered. By the time the servant returned, who had obeyed her orders, Lilian rallied again, and was preparing to put some farther questions ; when the corridor door again opened, and Cartaret made her appearance. Feeling too guilty to dare ask her anything, Lilian, not in the most enviable state of mind, speedily retreated to her own room.

Early on the following morning Mr Somerton arrived at the Abbey ; dreading, yet, at the same time, anxiously awaiting, his interview with Miss Berners. A letter from Lady Mary had again roused the most poignant incertitude and distress as to Margaret's fate, and at the same time renewed, if

possible, with greater intensity, those feelings of love and regret, which his resentment at her supposed unfaithfulness had momentarily subdued. It was no part of Lady Mary's project to deceive her son into a marriage with Alice Berners; therefore, though with intense regret, she conceived it her duty to inform him, that Mr Desmond now took every opportunity to deny his daughter's alleged marriage with Mr Compton; but he steadily refused to reveal her place of abode: which, he further added, circumstances imperatively compelled Margaret to conceal. Lady Mary also stated, that she understood Mr Desmond never mentioned Mrs Beaufort's name without expressing the strongest indignation at her treatment of his daughter.

This letter, as may be supposed, increased not a little Mr Somerton's reluctance to bind himself by any promise to Alice. Altogether, her strange conduct, her fitful abstraction and wayward humour, added to the mystery attending Margaret's disappearance, roused the most unpleasant suspicions in his breast.

As Mr Somerton rode slowly through the park towards the Abbey, he perceived Mr Braddyll at some distance, moodily strolling along, with folded arms and his hat thrust over his eyes. Mr Somerton

was riding on the turf, consequently, it was only when at a few yards distance, that the heavy sound of the horse's hoofs on the grass, and the creaking of the saddle, attracted Mr Braddyll's attention. He hastily turned, and a slight frown contracted his brow, while abruptly acknowledging Mr Somerton's distant greeting ; then quickening his steps, he darted down a pathway, winding amidst a grove of linden trees, leading, by a much shorter cut, to the mansion than the road direct from the lodge.

It was Mr Braddyll's anxious desire to reach the Abbey before Mr Somerton, in order to make one more attempt to obtain an interview with Mrs Beaufort ; as, since the preceding day, she pertinaciously refused to admit him again to her presence. He perceived that his violence had hastened the catastrophe he so much dreaded ; and, urged by vain regrets, he had addressed a letter to Mrs Beaufort, full of specious apologies for his insulting language, and want of proper command of temper, when last in her presence ; and entreating, if she valued her future peace, that she would either admit him to another interview, or suffer him to plead his cause with her daughter. The letter concluded by dark threats of a counter-movement, which should overwhelm her

with shame and dismay, were she imprudent enough to put her meditated designs into execution. This letter Mrs Beaufort immediately returned unsealed ; and at the same time Mark Braddyll, from the mouth of her messenger, learnt the departure of Alice Berners from the Abbey.

Bitter imprecations issued from Mr Braddyll's impious lips ; for with his usual cunning foresight, he felt inwardly persuaded that it was Captain Stuart who had induced Alice to take this decisive step ; even if his entreaties had not so wrought upon her mind as to lead her to confess, before her departure, the intrigue arrayed against Margaret's peace. From that moment the resolution to possess himself of Ginevra Marescotti, at the risk of any outrage or sacrifice, rose with double force, and dark determination in Mark Braddyll's bold, bad mind. Let Mrs Beaufort acknowledge Ginevra as her lawful daughter and heiress—despite his menace concerning Gasparo Marescotti, which he was fully prepared to enforce—and Ginevra, with her gentleness and improved health, should still be his : her riches, the prize he had so long coveted ; her possession, the shield intervening between himself and the punishment, justly his due for the lawless outrage he now meditated. Years, glow-

ing with the hope of future boundless wealth, were not to have been spent in vain ; nor the bright illusion dissipated by the sudden caprice and tender conscience of her whom he had so long tyrannized over !

As for Lilian Grant, not a thought of the probable pangs and forebodings she was enduring, mingled with the vile, lawless calculations absorbing Mark Braddyll's mind, as he slowly proceeded ; save, perhaps, that a smile of derisive malice curled his lip, while fancy pictured her dismay and despair, when he, having attained the summit of his ambition, should repay back her taunts with tenfold scorn, and summarily avenge her presumption in daring to counteract his well-planned schemes relative to Margaret Desmond.

On Mr Somerton's arrival at the Abbey, he was ushered into the room in which his first interview with Alice, after Margaret's departure, happened ; and where he supposed that he should find her again. After awaiting some time, the door presently opened ; Mr Somerton looked, expecting to be greeted with Alice's sunny smile ; but, instead, a servant presented him with a letter, and delivered a message from Mrs Beaufort, requesting him not to leave the Abbey until she had seen him. The letter

was that which Alice had confided to Mrs Beaufort's care for Mr Somerton.

To describe his sensations on perusing it, would be impossible: with mingled feelings of joy and delight he read of his own honourable release from an engagement he shrank from, and of Margaret's innocence of the mysterious deed of which she was accused; and with sorrowful regret, that Alice Berners, with her seeming truth and fascination of character, should have been guilty of hypocrisy so cruel and heartless. He recalled the burning blush on her cheek, and the trembling, tearful agitation of her manner, while those words which led him to believe that he had unconsciously won her heart, fell from her false, though beautiful lips, as she sat in the very place where he now perused her tardy confession: where likewise her heart bore witness to the lie she uttered, when denying her betrothment to Cuthbert Stuart, and even suffering him to appropriate the pledge which the latter, in full persuasion of her love, had placed on her finger! Her base motives, also, for this tissue of hypocrisy and fraud,—his wealth, and to obtain the probable reversion of Mrs Beaufort's likewise,—which Alice, in her letter, informed him she was led to

expect only if she became his wife, kindled his anger and scorn ; and at the moment, not even Alice's touching expressions of penitence and sorrow could soften the contempt and resentment Mr Somerton felt for her conduct. So great was his indignation, and his impatience to call Mr Braddyll to account for his share in the transaction, that had not Alice abruptly concluded her letter by referring him to Mrs Beaufort for a detailed account of all she knew respecting Margaret, Mr Somerton's patience would hardly have brooked the tardy summons he had promised to await.

Chafing with indignation, yet still with more of renewed hope and happiness at heart than he had felt for many a day, Mr Somerton walked up and down the room, with Alice's letter in his hand ; debating what steps he should now take on Margaret's behalf ; of whose perfect innocence and purity not a doubt lingered in his mind. At length the room door opened again ; not, however, to admit the eagerly expected mistress of the mansion, but Mr Carnegie.

The two gentlemen surveyed each other in silent astonishment.

" You look discomposed this morning, Somerton. Is it the hot ride from Dingley, or the still hotter

tongue of your fair betrothed, Alice Berners, that is in fault?" asked Mr Carnegie, ironically, seating himself near the window.

"Neither. Have you heard tidings of Margaret Desmond?" inquired Mr Somerton, hastily.

"No ; but ere I leave this house"—Mr Carnegie paused, then presently resumed, in pleasanter tones : "I received your letter yesterday, and it is strange to me if all is not out before many days elapse : I have given myself some trouble in the matter, for my own satisfaction. As for Mrs Margaret Compton, I suppose she made use of me as long as she thought I could be of any service to her, and then leaves me in this state of incertitude——"

"Stay, Mr Carnegie ! You wrong Margaret Desmond : you are deceived in supposing that she has eloped with Mr Compton. She has been the victim of a most cruel fraud, in which Miss Berners joined. Alice has made a full confession of all she knows, and is now on her way back to her aunt, Mrs Cecil, in Scotland," exclaimed Mr Somerton, eagerly.

The colour rose to Mr Carnegie's face.

"I knew it long ago ! I knew that the poor girl had been driven from the Abbey, through some of their diabolical schemes ! If I live, both Agatha

Beaufort, and her myrmidons, shall be brought to a reckoning to-day, or my name is not what it is! So that amiable, most courteous young lady, Alice Berners, has confessed at last! Humph! Does she tell you, in that letter, that she never cared a fig for you, but only bore right worshipful respect for your goods and chattels, and joined Margaret's enemies that she might drive her away, and so humbug you into endowing her with them?" asked Mr Carnegie, in his most angry, sarcastic tones.

It was now Mr Somerton's turn to colour.

"I fear that I can only so construe her letter. We do not know how Alice may have been tempted by the artful insinuations of those around her. Let us remember that she now repents, and tries to make ample atonement for her error," rejoined Mr Somerton.

"No, she found that not all the wealth of the world could compensate to her for playing the hypocrite longer. I knew that Cuthbert Stuart's power over her was not so easily cast aside for your wealth, as Miss Alice imagined; therefore, I gave him a hint to try his influence once more. But that 'a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush,' is a truth that I

doubt not, Alice would now willingly acknowledge, if I interpreted rightly an incoherent epistle I received this morning from Stuart. Pray, have you discovered where Margaret Desmond has taken refuge, as you tell me so positively that she is not married to Mr Compton?" asked Mr Carnegie, with feigned indifference.

Mr Somerton briefly imparted the substance of his mother's letter.

"Well, sir, what course do you now intend to pursue?" demanded Mr Carnegie, after a few moments of silent meditation.

"Alice, in her letter, refers me for further particulars to Mrs Beaufort. After I have obtained an interview with her, I shall set off immediately for Woodthorpe, see Mr Desmond, and assert my right to be put into immediate possession of his daughter's secret. Then I shall seek Margaret, wherever she is to be found; and learn the reason of her silence, and her disregard of the engagement that once subsisted between us!" said Mr Somerton, earnestly.

"Remember, that if you ask Margaret Desmond to become your wife, and she accepts you, you will take her without a penny: she has nothing to ex-

pect now from Mrs Beaufort: who has claims upon her that you little imagine!" rejoined Mr Carnegie, pointedly.

"I want nothing with Margaret Desmond but that which I firmly believe I possess—her love!" replied Mr Somerton, proudly.

"Then you will be actually mad enough to marry this girl—a dependant on Agatha Beaufort's bounty—and give her every advantage in the way of settlements, which Alice might have claimed, had her visions of heiress-ship been realized!" added Mr Carnegie, in a tone of ridicule; laughing, also, in his most satirical manner.

"Assuredly!" replied Mr Somerton shortly, turning away with an offended manner and air.

Mr Carnegie did not speak again, but sat buried in reverie; occasionally fidgetting up and down the room, with his hands thrust in his pocket; murmuring to himself, and exhibiting unmistakeable signs of impatience and disquietude, whilst his eyes were at times fixed with curious glance on Alice's letter, which Mr Somerton held in his hand: though he was too discreet to demand permission to peruse it.

At length a servant entered to usher the gentlemen

to Mrs Beaufort's presence, who awaited them in the library.

"So, Somerton, it appears you are summoned by Agatha Beaufort also. Can you stand a sharp contest? We shall have pretty hot work of it this morning, to judge by her note to me. That rascal Mark Braddyll, and his minion, Lilian Grant! We shall soon see who is master here!" ejaculated Mr Carnegie, at intervals, to his astonished companion; as he fiercely strode across the hall, with a deportment which, at any other time, would have appeared to Mr Somerton ludicrous in the extreme.

When the library door opened, Mr Somerton eagerly glanced at the party assembled within. The first person his eye encountered was Lilian Grant; she was standing leaning against the mantelpiece; her face was very pale; and her looks evinced, that only by great mental self-control was she enabled to preserve outward calmness: her lips were white, and steadily compressed together; one arm hung down by her side, and her fingers nervously grasped the lace trimming of her apron. Mr Braddyll stood, with erect, defiant attitude, at a short distance from Lilian, his features inflamed with recent pas-

sion ; though, when the gentlemen entered the room, he returned their salute by a smile, according little with the malicious expression still sparkling in his eyes. Mrs Beaufort sat at a table in the recess of one of the windows. For once, anger, or agitation, had brought back its former beautiful colouring to her face. Her eyes were steadily fixed on the table ; and her whole deportment was that of one labouring under violent excitement, though subdued in its external manifestation.

Behind, on a sofa fitting into the recess, often concealed by Mrs Beaufort's stately figure, sat Ginevra Marescotti. She was attired in white, and her long ringlets fell in golden clusters round a brow, and throat of exquisite fairness. The clear, rosy hue of her cheek deepened fitfully at times into the most brilliant carmine, then faded away, leaving her complexion colourless as her dress. The radiance of her deep, violet eyes was dimmed with tears, and her slight figure quivered painfully. She sat with her arm resting on the back of Mrs Beaufort's chair, her head rather averted, as if unable to bear the curious gaze directed upon her.

Mr Somerton's eyes soon rested in surprise and admiration on Ginevra's face ; and vainly he looked

round for an explanation of the emotion which he perceived agitated every one present. As for Mr Carnegie, he boldly advanced to the table at which Mrs Beaufort was seated. She rose to receive him, and silently gave him her hand. Mr Somerton she greeted in the same manner ; only she pointed to a vacant chair by her side, and remained standing until he had taken possession of it.

During this interval, Mr Carnegie stood with his eyes fixed upon Ginevra. This prolonged gaze appeared to be torture to the poor girl : her cheek grew crimson, and tears gathered in her eyes. Mr Carnegie then walked up and took her hand in his. This trifling act of kindness seemed to re-assure Ginevra, who had not forgotten his care of Margaret ; and a smile parted her lips. Mr Carnegie then abruptly turned away, and took a general survey of every individual present ; his eyes finally resting on Mrs Beaufort. He saw that she, the hitherto proud, unflinching woman, was struggling with her emotion ; and that Mrs Beaufort's eyes were filled with tears, as they momentarily rested on Ginevra. The blood rose to Mr Carnegie's cheek.

“ Well, madam, you have summoned us to your presence early enough this morning ! We are here

to obey your bidding, whatever it may be, and to aid you to defend lawful right against all opposers. ‘It never rains but it pours,’ is a homely proverb, to my mind peculiarly applicable to several amongst us here. Pray take a seat, ma’am!” exclaimed Mr Carnegie, with prompt politeness, offering his chair to Lilian Grant; who, with noiseless step, had glided towards the table, and there stood, looking pale as ashes. She declined it, however, with a haughty gesture, and Mr Carnegie quietly reseated himself; indulging in a short, satirical laugh.

Mrs Beaufort, who during this brief moment had recovered her usual dignified deportment, took up a silver hand-bell from the table, and rang it loudly and deliberately. Mr Braddyll, who previously had kept his dark eyes savagely fixed upon her, now made an effort to approach and address her. Mrs Beaufort angrily waved him back, just as the door opened to admit Cartaret, the housekeeper, and several other of the upper domestics of the Abbey. Cartaret advanced, and took her place behind her mistress’s chair; the others ranged themselves at the bottom of the room. Amidst the deepest silence Mrs Beaufort then rose from her chair; Mr Carnegie, perhaps by the force of sym-

pathy, did so likewise, and stood with his hands in his pocket, and his back to the window, so as to command a full view of everybody present.

“It is God’s unerring decree, that retribution shall overtake all who have failed in the faithful discharge of those earthly duties which He has allotted to each. Casting aside every feeling of pride, I submit to the penalty. By a righteous dispensation, the self-denial of years past, and the mental anguish, at the cost of which I guarded the secret I have here assembled you all to reveal, have but added to the bitterness of the present moment. The supposed disgrace of owning an inferior, and in some degree compulsory, marriage, has hitherto prevented its admission. The time, however, has arrived when my secret can no longer be withholden, without perilling the future happiness of one dearer to me than reputation, for that dear one’s happiness is now endangered by the machinations of a villain. I no longer hesitate, therefore, in doing this tardy justice, and repairing the wrong I have inflicted. Some time before I quitted Italy, a secret marriage, celebrated according to both Protestant and Romish rituals, united me, in the late Sir John Beaufort’s presence, to the Chevalier Gasparo Marescotti. On the means

used by that individual to obtain my hand, consideration for the father of my child, and above all, her presence, now keeps me silent. I have, therefore, summoned you, Mr Somerton, and you, Mr Carnegie, to witness this, my solemn declaration:—I here publicly acknowledge, in your presence, on the most solemn oath in the power of a human being to utter, Ginevra, the sole offspring of the marriage contracted by me at Rome with Gasparo Marescotti, as my daughter and legitimate heiress. The certificate of my marriage with the Chevalier Marescotti, and every paper relative to that event, and our daughter's birth at Milan, will be found in this packet."

Mrs Beaufort paused ; shame and distress were visible on her brow, and the words seemed to die away on her lips, as presently she attempted to resume her explanation. A dead silence prevailed : all, except two individuals, were too much amazed to offer any comment, and sat in wondering expectation of what might follow. "To you, Mr Carnegie—if at my earnest request you will accept the task—I intrust the perusal and examination of these documents. No one will accuse *you* of undue partiality to me," continued Mrs Beaufort, with a bitter laugh ; "and if any should be bold or

insolent enough to assail my daughter's rights, you, in the name of honour and justice, must aid me to assert them! At the present moment I have only one more duty to perform—and that the sole act which at this painful hour can bring solace to my heart—to present to you my beloved child!" added Mrs Beaufort, speaking quickly and excitedly. "During the last two years, though none of you have suspected it, she has lived under this roof; and her presence has shed the only ray of joy and hope that for years has brightened my life. Ginevra," continued she, turning towards the weeping, agitated girl, "take courage!—show yourself, my child, worthy of the position you will henceforth occupy!" and Mrs Beaufort took her daughter's hand, and led her into the middle of the room.

"Humph! A pity all this was not said before," murmured Mr Carnegie.

"I congratulate my fair cousin, Ginevra Marescotti! Perhaps I shall have occasion, ere long, to offer my felicitations to her on the discovery of a second parent!" exclaimed Mr Braddyll, advancing with a dark, menacing air, and attempting to take Ginevra's hand.

She shrank back with loathing from his touch.

Mr Carnegie perceived the movement, and laughed aloud. Mrs Beaufort's keen eye rested upon him : with an impulse she could not resist, she took Ginevra's hand and led her to him.

"My daughter, Mr Carnegie, and the heiress of Methwold !" exclaimed she, emphatically.

"Your daughter, undoubtedly, madam, as you have just been pleased to inform us ; and a more comely and beautiful young woman my eyes have never beheld ! I will see that justice be done to her, though it costs me every sixpence I am worth !" and Mr Carnegie's fingers closed still more tightly over the roll of papers relating to Ginevra's birth ; which he had immediately taken into his own keeping, as soon as requested to do so by Mrs Beaufort.

Again Mr Braddyll muttered something inaudible, and his eyes gloomily followed Mrs Beaufort, who led her daughter to the end of the room ; where several of her old and faithful servants stood, still speechless with amazement, and surveying their new young mistress with incredulous wonder. With soft accents, and gracious manner, Ginevra spoke to each : then, at a sign from Mrs Beaufort, they quitted the room, Cartaret alone remaining.

The agitation of the scene, and the sight of Mark

Braddyll, had been almost more than Ginevra's delicate frame could bear ; and her glittering eye and flushed cheek evinced that more excitement might be attended with disastrous results.

" You must retire, my Ginevra. You know how earnestly you have besought me to perform what I am about to do ! Go, therefore, dearest, with Cartaret !" whispered Mrs Beaufort, tenderly.

Ginevra gladly obeyed. As she passed Mr Somerton, she hurriedly paused, and extended her hand, saying, with the grace peculiar to her,—

" Mr Somerton, you have not spoken a word to me ! Dear Margaret Desmond, I fear, will call you to severe account for your neglect of her friend and sister !" exclaimed she, smiling through her tears ; then, without awaiting a reply, she hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER IX.

GINEVRA's departure removed the restraint each had imposed upon himself: for even Mr Braddyll's fierce passions subdued themselves in her presence.

For some minutes Mrs Beaufort sat with her face hidden by her hand: for the shame, and the feeling of unutterable anguish which now bowed her proud spirit, words cannot describe. Already she experienced a foretaste of that condemnation which the good and high-principled would surely award to her past conduct, in the sorrowful surprise and rebuke expressed in the glance of Leonard Somerton's eloquent eyes.

And yet her humiliating task was not completed. In Ginevra's presence she found it impossible to relate any part of the subtle fraud to which, through her own imprudence, she had fallen a victim; but it was due to herself that many of the circum-

stances should be explained. All these varied thoughts passed in a moment of time through her mind ; for Ginevra had scarcely quitted the room when Mr Carnegie spoke.

“ Well, madam, I, for one, confess to have listened with excessive surprise to the strange avowal you have just condescended to make. To become the wife of a poor Italian adventurer, must indeed have been a bitter pill for the lofty Miss Beaufort to swallow ! Nay, it would be a fact quite inexplicable, had not king Solomon himself unfolded the mystery, when he said, ‘ Pride goeth before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction ! ’ I dare say, now, Madame Marescotti, that——”

Mr Somerton made a hasty gesture of surprise and indignation.

“ Address me not by that hateful name !—a name forced upon me by fraud the most base ! ” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, vehemently, while an expression of intense anguish passed over her face. “ I summoned you not to make a partial disclosure of my history. The past, as far as may be, shall be unfolded ; and you may then judge of the tortures I and mine have suffered, and are still enduring, owing to the unprincipled intrigues of Marescotti’s nephew yonder—Mark

Braddyll. To you, Mr Somerton, I appeal for protection against the insulting taunts of one whom I have never injured, but whose known enmity to me is the sole reason why I have summoned him hither,—that the world may know I seek no apologist for my actions, and that, such as they are, I abide by, and publish them,” continued she, haughtily.

“I believe and trust, Mrs Beaufort, that you judge Mr Carnegie wrongly. No one conscious of his own defects can ungenerously taunt another who is anxious to repair to the utmost an error; the effect, perhaps, of circumstances into which, placed in a similar position, he might have been betrayed himself!” replied Mr Somerton, promptly: for Mr Carnegie’s language had greatly roused his indignation.

“Well, madam, time will show whether you accuse me justly or unjustly. Only proceed, now!” responded Mr Carnegie, hastily.

Mr Braddyll advanced and placed himself opposite to Mrs Beaufort. Disregarding, however, his threatening gestures, she began, and in low accents related the history of her early connexion with Gasparo Marescotti; alluding merely to her love for her cousin, and Mr Desmond’s disregard of her advances: the foundation of Gasparo’s successful intrigue, as an

important secret which the latter discovered in the discharge of his duties as Sir John's secretary, and basely used to achieve his designs. As she proceeded, Mrs Beaufort's voice strengthened; while emphatically detailing Marescotti's subtle and successful counterplot to her own scheme, for obtaining back the letters of which he threatened to avail himself,—her father's intervention in the affair, and his stern, cruel decision, that the secret of her husband's disappearance should be concealed from her; and the failure of her search amongst Sir John's papers, at his decease, to discover any document that could enlighten her as to Marescotti's fate.

“I have it in my power, happily, to obviate your embarrassment on that subject, madam!” exclaimed Mr Braddyll, rudely breaking into Mrs Beaufort's narrative. “However, as candour and frank confession are qualities patronized by you this morning, it is a pity you should omit to state to these gentlemen, that the secret my handsome uncle discovered, and so cleverly availed himself of, to vanquish at once Miss Beaufort's fast-yielding scruples to his suit—whatever nonsense she is pleased to utter about compulsion on his part——was——”

Mrs Beaufort started from her chair. An expres-

sion of the most intense apprehension contracted her brow.

“Refrain, Mark Braddyll, refrain! Have you no honour?—no human sympathies?—that you dare thus trample upon, and proclaim the most sacred, and secret impulses of another’s heart? Forbear!” exclaimed she, in accents almost frenzied in intensity.

“Miss Beaufort’s notable secret was, that her heart bestowed itself, unasked and unsought for, upon her cousin Francis Desmond, and, consequently, met with scorn and repulse. This my uncle discovered; and he threatened to disclose to the gentleman so honoured, the reason of the outrageous persecution Mr Desmond and his wife met with at the hands of Sir John and his amiable daughter!” exclaimed Mr Braddyll, with a loud, brutal laugh of triumph.

Mrs Beaufort fell back in her chair, and buried her face in her hands. As for Mr Carnegie, after first fixing a look of vehement contempt and indignation upon Mr Braddyll, he turned his eyes on Mrs Beaufort, and then said slowly, in his most taunting, sarcastic tones,

“Is this possible, madam? Is it true that Agatha Beaufort’s proud, unfeeling heart, was also scorned, and made to feel a portion of the torment she inflicted upon others?”

There was something in the tone of Mr Carnegie's voice which, agitated as she was, caused Mrs Beaufort to raise her eyes, and fix them scrutinizingly upon him.

"Mr Carnegie, I will not suffer this in my presence! Mrs Beaufort shall not thus be insulted. If you cannot moderate your language, and afford her that protection she is entitled to claim at our hands, from the unmanly outrage of the individual who has just been addressing us, I shall insist upon her leaving the room at once!" exclaimed Mr Somerton, angrily.

"Unmanly outrage! I speak but the truth: and Mrs Beaufort knows it! She has brought the humiliation upon herself! There are my proofs, consisting of copies of the letters written by her own hand, entreating her father to negotiate her marriage with this same Francis Desmond!" exclaimed Mr Brad-dyll, now quite beside himself with rage, dashing down a small packet of papers before Mr Carnegie. In a moment he recollected himself, and advanced to seize it again; but Mr Carnegie, who had taken Mr Somerton's sharp rebuke with admirable fortitude, grasped the papers, and, in an instant, flung them into the fire.

“Our proofs now, madam, consist but in the word of a villain! So never mind what Mr Braddyll says, for it’s nothing to the purpose. A pretty set of scoundrels, I always told you, you had got amongst! Pray let us hear, ma’am, what more you have to say,” exclaimed Mr Carnegie, laughing at his own dexterity, and reseating himself; while Mr Braddyll looked as if he were meditating prompt and summary vengeance for the affront.

Before he could find words to pour forth the vehemence of his anger, Mrs Beaufort raised her head. Indignation gave to her voice a firmer accent. Slightly, then, touching upon the wrong done to Ginevra by Mr Braddyll, she proceeded to recount the history of his visit to her at the Abbey, before her daughter’s arrival there; and the threat he afterwards used, to drag her suffering child to the altar, under pain of revealing the past, unless she consented to forward his designs on Margaret Desmond. She strongly depicted her horror and repugnance at the projects Mr Braddyll gradually disclosed; and her intention, dating from Ginevra’s illness, to frustrate them by the avowal she had just made. This resolution she only deferred from fear that her daughter’s malady would render such a confes-

sion needless, as far as her interest went; when, after Ginevra's decease, she trusted that a bribe, backed by Margaret's firm refusal to bestow her hand upon Mr Braddyll, would forever consign her secret to oblivion.

Mr Carnegie sat with folded arms, intently listening to Mrs Beaufort's relation; his countenance at times agitated by emotion or flushed with anger: yet not so absorbed but that his keen eyes fixed themselves from time to time on Lilian Grant. During Mrs Beaufort's narrative, her pale face had become of fiery hue; her lips were strongly compressed; and her eyes, usually so calm-looking, shone forth with fierce brightness beneath her knitted brow, as she bent them on Mr Braddyll.

"So much of his intrigue to force Margaret Desmond to bestow her hand upon him—and to compel me to make her, when his wife, my heiress, to the disinheritance of my daughter—Mr Braddyll took care distinctly to state; but the finale of his iniquitous scheme is not quite so clear," continued Mrs Beaufort, raising her voice, and speaking in tones of the keenest exasperation. "What will you say to the baseness of those personages, who played on the besetting foible of a passionate, excitable girl—torturing her to despair and desperation by the

most execrable craft and deceit—until they converted her into a reluctant accomplice of their infamous designs to destroy the reputation and prospects of another, by counterfeiting that other person's handwriting and fabricating a letter of the basest description, which they made appear their victim had written and heedlessly dropped? Such has been the treatment that Margaret Desmond has received under my roof! Alice Berners, with tears of heart-broken penitence, confessed the vile plot to me yesterday. Approach, Lilian Grant, and deny, if you dare, your guilty connivance in Mark Braddyll's schemes!" Mrs Beaufort paused an instant, and fixed her eyes sternly on Miss Grant; then she handed to Mr Carnegie the letter Lilian had counterfeited, and that which Alice addressed to her before leaving the Abbey.

All at once Lilian Grant bounded forward, and stood before the table at which Mrs Beaufort sat. Her face was deadly pale, and her livid, bloodless lips, quivered with suppressed fury.

"Mark Braddyll, you do not deny these charges! you cannot hurl back the lie into the face of your accusers! Fool that I was to trust you!" Lilian

paused ; then turned fiercely towards Mrs Beaufort. "Yes! I wrote that letter at this man's instigation, and under his direction, to ruin Margaret Desmond in your good opinion—to prevent her marriage with Leonard Somerton, which I was led to believe would fatally ruin his projects of ultimately inheriting these estates : but, I solemnly protest, that I knew not the nature of the secret power he wielded over Mrs Beaufort. I obeyed his commands ; and, while he thought me his poor deluded tool, I served my own revenge for his inconstancy better than——"

Suddenly Mr Braddyll roughly seized Lilian round the waist, and swung her to some distance from the table ; saying, in a hoarse, rapid whisper in her ear,—

"Have you sworn to frustrate all our designs by your mad violence and groundless jealousy? Fool! be silent! dissemble, and half an hour hence Methwold and its inmates bow before me!"

She struggled to release herself from his grasp ; gradually the look of vindictive rage faded from her face ; and in another moment Mr Braddyll spurned her from him : half insensible, from the combined effects of long-suppressed anger and fear.

Mr Somerton, meanwhile, hastily communicated to

Mrs Beaufort and Mr Carnegie the news he had that morning received from Lady Mary, of Margaret's safety ; with the important fact that her father knew the place of her retreat, though he refused to betray it—tidings, which seemed to obviate the disagreeable necessity of adopting coercive means for compelling Miss Grant to finish the confession she had commenced. Mr Carnegie then glanced over Alice's letter.

“Forged letters—wax impressions of keys—lying, and purloining papers from private cabinets—a pretty category ! Is it the custom, sir, in Italy to educate gentlemen like swindlers ? I congratulate you, madam, on having fallen in with two such accomplished knaves as Mr Braddyll and his distinguished relative !” exclaimed Mr Carnegie, with a satirical laugh ; when, after reading aloud various portions of Alice's letter, despite Mr Braddyll's frequent interruptions, he handed it back to Mrs Beaufort.

Miss Grant, meantime, shrank back again into the shelter afforded by the dark folds of the window-curtains. The fire which lurked in her eye was subdued, not quenched ; and she stood with sullen, threaten-

ing composure, awaiting the marvellous change which her perfidious lover promised to effect.

“Lilian Grant, are you disposed to make the slight reparation in your power, for your betrayal of the kindness and condescension you have uniformly experienced at my hands, by disclosing all that you know of the slanderous misrepresentations put forth by the person standing before me, relative to Margaret Desmond?” inquired Mrs Beaufort, indignantly.

Lilian Grant drew herself haughtily up, and her countenance assumed, if possible, an expression of more repulsive doggedness.

“I have nothing further to add to what you have already heard,” replied she, insolently, returning the glance Mrs Beaufort bent upon her.

“Then it only remains for me to dismiss you ignominiously from my house. You leave my presence instantly, and for ever, Miss Grant. So greatly do I abominate your past dissimulation, and distrust your integrity even in the smallest matters, that I shall command my maid not to lose sight of you as long as you remain under my roof!” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, vehemently.

“Then I say that she shall not leave the Abbey ! I, in my turn, command her to disregard and forget your insolent language, madam, and remain here as long as it is pleasant and agreeable to her, the Chevalier Marescotti’s welcome guest !” retorted Mr Braddyll, dashing his hand so violently on the table that a vase of flowers, standing in the centre, was overturned.

Mrs Beaufort’s majestic figure seemed to tower ; and her manner, instead of denoting tremulous agitation, was even more loftily composed and decided, as she turned towards him.

“You have taunted me with this before. I believe that you lie. Prove your assertion,—prove that Gasparo Marescotti lives, and dares to claim authority over me or mine !” exclaimed she, undauntedly.

“Yes : let us hear how you will prove this, sir !” said Mr Carnegie, with a laugh, turning very red ; then carefully adjusting his spectacles. “Sit down, Somerton, and let us give our best attention to the facts this very veracious gentleman has to impart regarding his relative !”

The party then gathered round the table. They who, like Mr Somerton, attentively watched the

varied emotions flitting across Mr Braddyll's dark brow, might have perceived thereon a shade of suspicion, and a gloomy cowering distrust, lurking in his eyes, as they momentarily encountered Mr Carnegie's sharp glance. However, Mr Braddyll recovered himself; and, taking a letter from his pocket, laid it before Mrs Beaufort.

"You will not, I suppose, presume to deny, madam, that this is your husband's handwriting? Did you imagine that Gasparo Marescotti was to be defrauded of his rights by the violence of an arrogant Englishman; or the puerile threats of one who had yet to learn the duty and submission of a wife? Gasparo Marescotti is not dead, but is residing at this moment in Italy. Six weeks hence he will present himself before you: nor is it probable that the lofty Mrs Beaufort, knowing her injured husband's disposition, will presume to dispute his commands and directions for her conduct during this interval; which he has been pleased to signify in that letter, addressed to me! The Chevalier Marescotti, until his arrival in England, deposes to me all power over the estates and effects possessed by the late Sir John Beaufort, and now inherited by his daughter; together with absolute authority to act in all things

in his name, without reference to Madame Marescotti: whom, with her daughter, he prohibits from taking any step for which she has not previously secured my assent and approbation, as his representative. Are you disposed to resist,—or rather, dare you venture to disobey these plainly written commands of your husband, madam?" asked Mr Braddyll, in a loud, elevated voice.

Mrs Beaufort leaned on the table; her hand was raised so as to conceal her face. Mr Carnegie rubbed his forehead; and, when Mr Braddyll finished speaking, without the slightest ceremony, he drew Marescotti's letter from before Mrs Beaufort, and carefully perused it.

"A capital counterfeit! An incomparable talent, sir, you possess here. Why, it must have taken you years to bring it to the perfection you can boast of. With the benefit of instructions such as yours, I can well see now how your promising pupil yonder, Miss Lilian Grant ——"

"Sir! What do you mean by applying such insinuations to me?" exclaimed Mr Braddyll, in a tone intended to silence the audacious old man.

"I mean, that a more contemptible, swindling rascal than one calling himself Mark Braddyll, never

existed ! ” continued Mr Carnegie, in the same quiet manner, still surveying the document before him. “ I say that Gasparo Marescotti has been dead and forgotten these eighteen years, and that this letter is another infamous forgery ! ”

Mr Braddyll ground his teeth with rage.

“ Prove its falsehood ! ” retorted he, snatching up the letter from the table ; then laughing defiantly, as he perceived a strange trepidation and hesitation in Mr Carnegie’s manner.

“ Madam, what I am going to unfold will be rather startling to you ; but I pray you restrain your feelings as far as possible ! ” said Mr Carnegie, in a voice gentle, and at times, in spite of his efforts, faltering with emotion.

Mrs Beaufort looked pallid and anxious ; her eyes were bent with a troubled, bewildered expression on Mr Carnegie.

“ One day, many years ago, madam, in this same room sat a lady in the bloom of youth, of peerless beauty, and lofty lineage. Near her stood one who worshipped her with ardent devotion, and who would have given his life to win her favour. He was of comparatively lowly birth to this beautiful woman who reigned over his heart ; and when at length he

dared confess his love, she received its avowal with freezing, bitter scorn. She goaded him with her taunts to desperation—to bitter enmity—and then left him; to wreak her vengeance for the insult, as she termed it, not on the offender, but on the individual dearest to him on earth, since she had discarded his love—his sister! Did you ever hear this tale before? Do you recognise me?”

Mrs Beaufort started wildly from her chair, and gazed on him.

“Basil Sullivan! I see it all now! Your enmity,—all is explained! You are avenged!” exclaimed she, in a voice tremulous with excess of emotion; and again leaning forwards on the table, Mrs Beaufort’s head drooped on her folded hands.

Mr Braddyll looked on sneeringly for a short time, and then said,—

“Although it may be a very pleasant finale to the scene we have just been favoured with, for Madame Marescotti to find a disagreeable neighbour converted into a quondam lover, I am at a loss to understand how this circumstance can invalidate the privileges I claim, in virtue of my uncle’s letter.”

“To proceed, madam,” continued Mr Carnegie,

“after you had thus spurned me, all the passionate love I bore you centered in one overwhelming feeling of revenge. I swore to hurl you from the height which enabled you to scorn me. This one predominant sentiment inspired me with fresh energy, and I sacrificed all—sister, home, friends, and country, to achieve it. I went abroad, and engaged actively in mercantile pursuits, to gain that wealth which I knew constituted an essential element in my scheme of revenge. Fortune abundantly prospered me: I became rich in a few years, beyond my most sanguine hopes. During this period my partner died, and not only bequeathed his fortune to me, but the sole proprietorship of our flourishing business, on condition that I took his name—one under which the firm had risen, and acquired a world-wide celebrity. I fixed my residence at Bombay, and, under my assumed name of Carnegie, was there introduced to your deceased brother, and in a short time became his friend and constant companion. So far my purpose was answered—but more of this anon: suffice it now, that, at Mr Beaufort’s death, a packet of papers forwarded to him from England remained in my possession; which, at the commencement of his illness, he had empowered me to open, to withdraw the

letters from his father and sister, that he expected to find enclosed therein. Your brother's decease was sudden : he never lived to know the contents of the packet ; but, madam, by it I obtained the means of as signal a revenge as I panted for. It contained the history you have just now related, in Sir John's handwriting, together with a copy of your marriage certificate, the register of your daughter's birth, the conditions of your separation from your worthless husband, and the certificate of Marescotti's subsequent death and interment, signed by the curé of the parish in which his decease happened : in short, every paper that you fruitlessly sought for amongst Sir John's effects——”

“Tell me what was Marescotti's fate!—that secret I would have given worlds to purchase ! Basil Sullivan, your revenge has been cruel—diabolical ! Surely my scorn merited not so bitter a retaliation as the years of torture which you have made me endure !” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, with passionate energy, rousing suddenly from the stupor of amazement with which she had listened to the first portion of Mr Carnegie's statement.

“With all his matchless cunning and arrogance, Marescotti could not contend with your father. By

mingled threats, a bribe of ten thousand pounds—the addition Sir John intended to make to the fortune you inherited in right of your mother—and a promise that his powerful influence should hereafter be exerted to advance his prospects, Marescotti, (as the only alternative from being dragged as a felon to the bar, for his theft on your father), consented to enter the ranks of the Romish priesthood. Your assent to the measure that separated you for ever from your husband, and which alone could render his ordination to priestly functions valid, Sir John readily obtained. Your father's influence hastened the initiatory proceedings, and a few months after his daughter's birth, Marescotti became a priest. The sphere in which he was immediately appointed to exercise his priestly office was designedly a distant one; and before his departure abroad, Marescotti visited his sister, Madame Alberghini, to take leave of her, and to embrace his child. While at his sister's house, the excitement and agitation of the past months brought on a violent attack of fever; which in a few days proved fatal. This certificate of his burial, and the accompanying letter from Madame Alberghini, containing a full relation of her brother's death, were forwarded to your father, madam, exactly

three months before his decease; and by him—in pursuance of the plan he had resolved, to visit upon you the offence you had committed, in so rashly bestowing your hand—were sent out to India, to your brother; for fear lest, during the latter's absence, they might fall into your hands. Sir John emphatically commanded his son to observe his dying request, and never to reveal the secret of your release to you, save under circumstances of the utmost necessity; in order that the uncertainty respecting your husband's fate might prevent you from again dishonouring your family," said Mr Carnegie, and he composedly drew from his pocket a multitude of documents, and laid them before Mrs Beaufort.

An ejaculation of fervent thankfulness escaped Mrs Beaufort's lips; and for a moment or two she averted her head, to hide the tears, which, despite her proud reserve, now glided down her cheeks. Mr Carnegie turned hastily away.

"As for you, sir," continued he, addressing Mr Braddyll—who, though agitated, had yet a frown of defiance on his face—"your imposture has been proved. What your motives were, for this last piece of knavery, you can best judge; but we are exercising the utmost forbearance in not committing you

instantly to prison, on Mr Somerton's warrant, for attempting to obtain money by forged documents. But, mark me ! I am Margaret Desmond's uncle : her place of concealment from your outrages is known to her father ; therefore, many hours cannot elapse before she is once more here. If I then find that, in any way, my niece has suffered personal violence or insult at your hands, there is no obscurity deep enough, or refuge distant enough, to shield you from condign punishment ! Go ! leave Methwold Abbey, covered with the shame and disgrace of a villain foiled in his base projects !”

The ruling passion of haughty command towered yet in Mrs Beaufort's bosom, despite her agitation, when she heard Mr Carnegie's voice raised authoritatively under her roof ; and words of contemptuous irony fell from her lips as she reiterated the command. Her eye then slowly wandered round the apartment, in search of Lilian Grant ; but she had disappeared.

Mr Braddyll's fierce countenance lighted up with accumulated rage.

“I obey you, madam. But I will still carry my point ; though the unexpected revelation of your husband's decease, which you have just now heard from

the lips of that individual—who, while censuring my past conduct, unconsciously stigmatizes his own duplicity—seems to place it beyond my power. Let those triumph who win!" exclaimed he, in a loud, menacing voice, immediately quitting the room.

Silence remained unbroken for some time after Mr Braddyll left. Mrs Beaufort sat with pale, sorrowful brow and compressed lips; her eyes every now and then wandering over Mr Carnegie's face and figure, as if seeking to recall long-forgotten recollections.

Age, and that a premature one, from long residence in a tropical climate, together with the ravages of the dreadful disorder which had thickened, and left indelible traces on his features, had so altered Basil Sullivan's appearance, that Mrs Beaufort found it difficult to detect any resemblance, even in the shape of the face before her, to the fresh-looking, though homely features of her *ci-devant* admirer, at the time when she so harshly repulsed him. His ideas, and conversation also, from friction with the world, now took a wider range; while his manners, still unconciliating as ever, were, perhaps, from perpetually brooding over his past injuries, more cynical and positive than before. Mrs Beaufort's

almost utter forgetfulness of Basil Sullivan and his suit—absorbed continually as she had been in affairs of greater present moment—combined with Mr Carnegie's opulence, had prevented her from suspecting the truth, even in the most remote degree.

“Basil Sullivan, you cannot expect gratitude from me for the revelation which, at the eleventh hour, you have chosen to make. The suppression of those papers was an act of unheard of retaliation, dishonourable and base!” said Mrs Beaufort, at length, in a voice of forced composure. Then she quickly added,—“How is it that Basil Sullivan has at last suffered himself to relent?”

“Because your pride is humbled, madam. When I returned to England, I do not deny that I was actuated by sentiments of the utmost hatred and revenge: I established myself near to you, gradually to undermine your influence, and to overthrow what *you* worshipped—pomp and power—by as sudden and rude a blow as that with which you annihilated *my* hopes and happiness. When I arrived, however, I found you, the haughty Mrs Beaufort, a slave in your own house: insulted and humiliated, by one still more basely born than him who, with injurious words, you had formerly driven from you. I

saw, and gloried in, the tortures which bowed your proud spirit to the earth. I knew of your daughter's existence, and that every public act of your life was a lie ; and I exulted in the thought that your reputation was in my power : that at will I could blast and take from you all which you so highly prized ! I was on the point of consummating my triumph, when, in a most remarkable manner, I met my injured sister's only child. I knew of Agnes's death, and also the circumstances of extreme poverty into which her husband and daughter had fallen. To inquire after Francis Desmond and his family, had been one of my chief cares on arriving in England ; but I delayed making myself known to them, in order that their triumph over their unfeeling relative might be signal as my own. You, madam, however, unexpectedly sent for Margaret Desmond ; you were kind to her : she spoke of you to me even with affection. She told me of the pension you had settled upon her father, of the bitterness of the persecution to which you were subjected, and of the deep dejection and misery of your life. From the time that I compelled you to acknowledge your relationship to her, you at once, and publicly, reinstated Margaret in the position she had a right to claim under your roof. To Margaret

Desmond, then, you owe my resolve to deliver you from the degrading bondage in which Marescotti's nephew held you: but, also, I determined that this relief should only be afforded by me, after you had openly done justice to your innocent and suffering daughter. I have still another and most cogent reason to give you for my actions, madam——” Mr Carnegie stopped, and fixed his small, piercing eyes on Mrs Beaufort's face; who listened in an attitude of painful, excited attention. “I have acted as I have done this morning, because it is *my interest* so to do. Methwold Abbey, the lordly home of the Beauforts, has passed from their race: it no longer belongs to you—in fact, it was never yours. A single stroke of my pen, at any instant after you entered into imaginary possession, could have ejected you as an intruder, and usurper of another's rights. Methwold Abbey is mine!—Basil Sullivan's, whom, five-and-thirty years ago, you ignominiously dismissed from your presence,” exclaimed Mr Carnegie, in a loud, triumphant voice.

A burst of the wildest passion and incredulity flushed Mrs Beaufort's cheeks; her fingers closed tightly over a book lying on the table before her; and her voice, when she spoke, was hoarse and tremulous.

"Yours, Basil Sullivan? Methwold Abbey, the home of my ancestors, yours! You abuse my forbearance!" exclaimed she, with vehement irony.

"It belongs to me, madam, by as good a title as any by which the ancestors, on whom you pride yourself, held it! Basil Sullivan, brother of that Agnes whom you once so cruelly scorned and insulted, is master of the very roof that shelters you!" rejoined Mr Carnegie, tauntingly.

"Explain yourself, sir! It is neither honourable nor manly to deal in taunts and empty assertions: Prove your words!" interposed Mr Somerton, hastily, perceiving the sudden pallor that now overspread Mrs Beaufort's face. She sat with her dark eyes bent on the carpet; her features still, almost with the repose of death. When Mr Somerton spoke, she wildly raised her eyes.

"I once before told you, madam, that neither Mr Beaufort nor his sister were bright, shining lights of themselves; but were frequently obliged to draw largely on the renown bequeathed by their illustrious ancestry, to sustain their reputation," resumed Mr Carnegie, in his usual cynical manner. "My reason for seeking the late Hugh Beaufort's friendship, therefore, was not admiration of the virtue or decorum of his

life. Before Sir John's death, Mr Beaufort, as you are doubtless aware, held a post of great trust and importance at Bombay; and in the discharge of his duties large sums of public money passed through his hands: in a word, madam—disgraceful and incredible as it may appear to the Beauforts—your brother gambled, and squandered away not only his own ample income, but, by degrees, large sums of public treasure also. In time, this dishonest debt amounted to no less than thirty thousand pounds. Suddenly Mr Beaufort's accounts were demanded; and ruin and degradation awaited him, unless by some means he could make up the deficiency. I was his friend, and one of the wealthiest merchants in Bombay; to me, therefore, your brother applied. Thirty thousand pounds were instantly advanced by me on the mansion, furniture, and lands of Methwold Abbey; and I caused it to be inserted in the deed, that, at Sir John Beaufort's death, the choice was to be mine absolutely, whether I received back the loan in money, or took in lieu the estate: or so much of it as would amount, by a fair valuation, to the sum I lent your brother. Mr Beaufort's necessity was urgent; and in case he failed to raise the money, his disgrace so certain and overwhelming, that, trusting to my future forbear-

ance, he was obliged to accept the only conditions on which he could obtain it; and he signed the deed. This morning, madam, I have written to my attorney, desiring him to commence proceedings to enforce my rights, without delay!"

"Could Hugh Beaufort act thus! I disclaim him as my brother! If what you say be true, to you, then, Basil Sullivan, I plead for the honour of our family. I will repay the sum borrowed, even doubly, at your demand. Methwold, the beautiful heritage of my Ginevra——" Mrs Beaufort paused; words seemed to fail her.

"I care not for the money. Methwold Abbey is mine, and I will claim it. It is, however, but a portion of your vast fortune, madam. Console yourself, therefore; for your daughter will yet be a rich heiress; though, like her mother, she will not lord it from Methwold." Mr Carnegie paused; and then turned, speaking in milder and more subdued accents, toward Mr Somerton. "Somerton, you loved my niece, and would have taken her for your wife, whilst she was poor, friendless, and despised. I joyfully give her to you, therefore; and with her, Methwold Abbey as a marriage portion. Agnes Sullivan's

child shall reign in the mansion, where her mother was scorned and treated as a menial ! ”

“ Every means of legal redress shall be exhausted, ere that happens. I have also learned to love and reverence Margaret Desmond’s character : but she shall not usurp my daughter’s rights. Again, Basil Sullivan, I offer you any ransom for Methwold which you choose to demand ! ” exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, more calmly ; though her effort to subdue the agitation which shook her was visible.

“ Margaret will not accept a sacrifice of the kind, believe me, dear Mrs Beaufort,” said Mr Somerton, emphatically : “ fearlessly, therefore, in her name and in my own, if I dare assume as much, I decline it. You do your niece injury, Mr Carnegie, if you suppose her capable of lending herself to such a scheme ; nor can I believe that you seriously entertain the unjust design of wresting Methwold Abbey from the family whose home it has been for centuries. I will now leave you with Mrs Beaufort. I can only say, Mr Carnegie, that if your niece becomes my wife, and, through the arbitrary enforcement of the power you possess, Methwold Abbey is given to her, the sole use she will make of your gift will be to restore it

again to its rightful owner !” and Mr Somerton quitted the room.

For some hours after his departure, Mrs Beaufort and Mr Carnegie conversed. Ere they parted, the brilliant sunlight was subdued ; and the western sky glowed with beautiful deep purple and maize-coloured clouds, throwing a cheerful glow into the room, and without, over the waving lawns and beautiful flowers.

Long afterwards, when far away from Methwold Abbey, Mrs Beaufort remembered that fair autumnal evening, and its gorgeous sunset.

CHAPTER X.

WITH renewed hope and buoyant spirit Mr Somerton returned to Dingley. So wonderful had been the change of events within a few hours, that, as yet, he could scarce realize the happy results likely to ensue therefrom. To find Margaret, and to hear her confess again her love, and her willingness to become his own, was the only sensation prominent in Mr Somerton's mind. At length, so impossible did he find it to subdue his eager impatience to behold her again, that three hours after his departure from the Abbey, Mr Somerton was on his road to Woodthorpe; determined to seek an interview with Mr Desmond, to tell the news of Margaret's complete exoneration, and to plead his right to be informed of the place of her retreat.

It was considerably past midnight when Mr So-

merton arrived at Woodthorpe Park. Sir James and Lady Mary, he found, had that morning left for London; owing to her ladyship's sudden indisposition. Another disappointment also awaited him; for, on calling the following morning, at a very early hour, on Mr Desmond, he was informed that the latter was from home. Determined not to be baffled, Mr Somerton then inquired for Mrs Desmond, and was immediately admitted into her presence.

Perhaps Mr Desmond's absence was a fortunate event for the accomplishment of the design Mr Somerton had in view. Mrs Desmond listened in tearful wonder and astonishment to the marvellous alteration a few days had wrought in their future prospects; and when she heard her handsome young landlord (whom she always looked upon with mingled admiration and respect) earnestly plead his attachment to Margaret as a reason why she should violate the strict promise that she had given her husband, not to divulge the place of his daughter's retreat, Mrs Desmond's woman's heart readily sympathized with his desire, and Mr Somerton skilfully drew from her, by degrees, not only the address of their kind friends the Russells, but also the greater portion of Margaret's history.

Well was it, perhaps, for Mrs Desmond's fortitude, that she had thus been forewarned of the change of destiny awaiting her husband; as, towards the middle of the following day, a messenger arrived bringing a letter from Mr Carnegie, containing an urgent summons for Mr Desmond to repair forthwith, with his wife, to the Holt. Mr Carnegie treated the matter in his usual abrupt style, delaying further explanations until they met; but he concluded his letter with an assurance to Mr Desmond, that he who, in spite of every obstacle, had so honourably loved and kept faith with Agnes Sullivan, should now share, to the last farthing, that wealth which it had pleased God to bestow upon her brother. Mr Carnegie's messenger, having strict orders from his master to deliver the letter to Mr Desmond personally, immediately proceeded with it to town; taking charge, also, of another missive from Mrs Desmond to her husband.

Gladdened and cheered by her reunion with her father, Margaret, meanwhile, had slightly rallied from that deep despondency of spirit which had rendered all things alike indifferent. Her animation, however, was gone; and it was often with difficulty that she went through the daily routine of walking, read-

ing, and needlework, which her kind and considerate friend persisted in imposing upon her. With feverish eagerness she watched the arrival of the daily paper; and when she had glanced down its columns, all interest for the day seemed to subside. Vainly Mrs Russell heaped her table with books, magazines, and all the lightest and most popular literature of the day, in the hope of drawing her young guest's thoughts and attention from herself. Often when, with delight, Mrs Russell beheld Margaret take up a new book, and bend over it with apparent interest for several hours; great used to be her disappointment, as, gently stealing from her seat, she peeped over Margaret's shoulder to glance at the title of the book, which proved attractive enough to afford her diversion, to find the volume open at the commencement, or seldom beyond the first few chapters.

Mr Compton was still an assiduous visiter at his aunt's house. Margaret had now become accustomed to his presence; and her frank and perfectly unembarrassed deportment seemed at once to extinguish the faint hopes which his aunt's sanguine predictions tended to revive. Indeed, Margaret had learned to anticipate Mr Compton's visits; for from him she

heard the various reports, current in the neighbourhood of Woodthorpe, relative to Mr Somerton's intended marriage. It was, also, with feelings of the deepest emotion, that she now received, from Mr Compton himself, the particulars of his interview with Mr Somerton, and heard of the latter's anxious inquiries about her. From this time a doubt often rose in Margaret's mind, whether she was acting rightly and honourably in preserving so strict a silence.

Was she justified in accepting public report, and the testimony of a newspaper paragraph, and judging Mr Somerton therefrom, in preference to relying on that conviction she once entertained of the truth and sincerity of his character? But then he had slighted that letter, which she had addressed to him in her deepest distress! for Margaret could not persuade herself that Mr Carnegie had suppressed it; and a blush rose to her cheek, that she should ever care to hear more of one who had so deserted her.

Then, at times, longings to hear news of Mrs Beaufort and of Ginevra rendered her restless and disquieted. Despite, therefore, Margaret's heroic resolutions of isolating herself for ever from those scenes and persons lately exercising so pernicious an

influence over her peace, she heard, with very philosophic composure and pleasure, that her father had thought proper peremptorily to contradict her reported marriage with Mr Compton. Yet for fear of accidentally meeting with Leonard Somerton, Margaret firmly declined accompanying Mrs Russell from home, and restricted herself, in her daily walks, to the large, airy garden contiguous to the house. Nor could her kind friend lure her to partake in any public amusement: Margaret obstinately persisted to live in the past. After Mr Desmond's arrival, his exhortations and entreaties were always met, indeed, with a gentle smile, but not the less decidedly rejected.

Nearly the whole of the mystic three months, during which she had been warned to conceal herself, had fled. What would then become of her? was a question often mooted in Margaret's mind. Her father threatened, at the expiration of this term, to make a minute and rigid investigation into the circumstances of her *enlèvement* by Mr Braddyll; and this menaced exposure rested painfully on her mind.

One evening, about four or five days after Mr Desmond's arrival, Margaret's thoughts dwelt on the past with more than her usual dejection and grief. She was sitting alone; her father having accom-

panied their kind host and hostess to the opera. Mrs Russell, without mentioning her design, had taken tickets, hoping that she had supplied an irresistible temptation for exertion ; but not all the attraction of Sontag's exquisite singing could draw Margaret from home : she sat listlessly on the sofa, with her work in her hand, and her thoughts far away. The couch was drawn close to the fire—for already the evenings were becoming chill, especially for an invalid—her book was placed upon a table near, and everything so arranged by Mrs Russell, that Margaret, during her solitary evening, might enjoy the greatest degree of comfort and amusement with the smallest amount of personal trouble. After a time, Margaret looked up, and laid her work aside. Without, all seemed sombre and gloomy : the carriages and people, as they flitted past the windows, looked shadowy and mysterious in the grey, misty twilight. She approached the window, and leaned over the stand of beautiful flowers before it ; they reminded her of the Abbey ; and tears soon filled Margaret's eyes.

Gradually it grew darker and darker ; the street lamps were lighted, and Margaret, as she looked at the dusky forms hurrying along, and then glanced round the comfortable room, illumined by the cheer-

ful firelight, reproached herself for feeling so intensely miserable and thankless, while such blessings still surrounded her. Presently a cab swiftly passed the window; the driver surveyed the house, then leaned forwards from the box, as if trying to read its number. Margaret then heard the vehicle suddenly stop; and after a little interval, a loud knock at the house-door set her heart beating: for she was still nervous in the highest degree. She knew, however, that she was not likely to experience intrusion from any stranger; for, on leaving home, both Mrs Russell and her father left peremptory orders, partly as a measure of prudence, that no person, however plausible might be his pretext, was to be admitted into Miss Desmond's presence during their absence.

Some conversation ensued between the servant and the visiter, in the hall; Margaret could not distinguish its purport, but involuntarily she shrank still farther back into the shadow cast by the window-curtains, and listened eagerly for the sound of the street-door closing. Again she heard strange footsteps in the passage; they approached, and ascended the stairs; a pause ensued,—then the drawing-room door opened, and a gentleman abruptly entered.

An exclamation of alarm burst from Margaret, without well knowing wherefore—for the firelight was too flickering and unsteady to afford her a perfect view of the intruder—she retreated swiftly, hoping to make her escape from the room ; as the thought of Mark Braddyll instantly rose in her mind. In another second, however, her name was uttered by a voice which thrilled through her, and almost arrested the wild pulsations of her heart. She suddenly paused, and stood, looking white, and trembling excessively ; her suspense lasted only a moment,—the next she was clasped in Mr Somerton's arms. Overpowered and agitated, Margaret wept hysterically on his bosom ; while with words of rapture he strove to soothe and comfort her.

“ Alice !—Oh, why was I betrayed into this emotion ! Mr Somerton, wherefore have you thus surprised me ? Must Alice Berners also meet with falsehood and betrayal at your hands ? ’ exclaimed Margaret, suddenly raising her head ; whilst a deep flush of resentment stole over her cheek, though her voice faltered with tears.

“ Alice Berners ! I never sought her, my own Margaret : nay, when I thought you lost to me for

ever, it was with feelings of the deepest dismay that I learned the preference with which she honoured me. Alice has since found out that I never merited her notice ; and she has now quitted Methwold, to become after a time, I trust, the happy wife of Captain Stuart !” exclaimed Mr Somerton, eagerly. “ Now, Margaret, say, in your turn, if you still love me—as these tears seem to testify,—why you left me in such cruel incertitude respecting your fate ? Was this according to the promise that you made me ? Why, and with whom, did you leave Methwold Abbey ? ” continued Mr Somerton, reproachfully, as Margaret still wept.

“ I left the Abbey intending to take refuge with Mr Carnegie. I did appeal to you, Leonard,—can it be that you never received the letter I addressed to you before taking that step ? I wrote to Mr Carnegie, likewise ! ” and Margaret raised her tearful, earnest eyes to Mr Somerton’s face.

“ I never received your letter, Margaret : the first intelligence that I had of your departure from the Abbey, was in a letter from the steward at Dingley to my father. That letter was suppressed, Margaret, and Mr Carnegie’s likewise. Mark Braddyll planned well his infamous plot to separate us ! But

it has already been partly avenged, and shall yet be signally so ; for I have since learned from Mrs Desmond some details of the outrage and misery you suffered at his hands."

"Yet, Leonard, was there then no foundation—not the slightest—for that other report, which has made me so miserable?" asked Margaret, excitedly ; then rising and approaching the table, she opened her work-box, took from it the paragraph she had cut from the newspaper, and placed it in Mr Somerton's hand.

"I never heard of or saw this impertinent paragraph before, Margaret ; nor have I ever swerved, in the remotest degree, from the faith pledged to you, dearest,—no, not even when your enemies and mine also spread the report of your marriage with another, to separate us ! Be calm, Margaret ! for my sake do not agitate yourself thus ! You must have been very ill : I see it in your altered appearance !" and Mr Somerton gently removed the hand which covered Margaret's face ; for she still wept.

She had suffered suspense so exquisite, that the reaction and revival again of hope in her heart was overpowering. Perceiving that she was still unable to speak, Mr Somerton calmly and cautiously related

to her all that had happened at Methwold Abbey, subsequent to her departure; passing over Alice's conduct as lightly and leniently as possible. He painted, in most vivid language, however, his sorrow and dismay at meeting her leaning on the arm of George Compton, in the park; when, after her reputed marriage, convinced by such apparently undeniable testimony of her faithlessness, he had then resolved, judging her lost to him for ever, to devote himself to Alice's happiness.

Margaret listened; her cheek sometimes flushed by indignation, at others by pity, as she learned Alice's ungenerous confederacy with her enemies, and that she was privy to the design to ruin her in Mrs Beaufort's esteem; with Miss Berners' subsequent remorse, which impelled her, at length, to an ample confession of her fault. Then, with breathless interest and amazement, Margaret heard her lover's eloquent recital of the events that had happened on the previous day at Methwold,—of Ginevra's public recognition as Mrs Beaufort's daughter, and the banishment of Mr Bradyll and Lilian Grant from the Abbey.

“And Mrs Beaufort!—Oh! Leonard, how did she endure the cruel exposure of her treasured secret?—she so proud and reserved,” asked Margaret,

eagerly ; her interest in the narrative having gradually dried her tears.

“Mrs Beaufort’s deportment was admirable. She met Mark Braddyll’s insults with astonishing command of temper ; though, of course, at times she was dreadfully affected. I cannot, however, Margaret, assign a similar tribute of praise to our friend Mr Carnegie ; who, although he has rendered us incalculable service, was frequently so abrupt and uncourteous in his observations as to kindle my indignation,” said Mr Somerton.

“Mr Carnegie’s friends must make allowances for his abruptness, in consideration of his kindly heart. Had it not been for him, Mark Braddyll’s intrigues must have triumphed : can we, therefore, ever be sufficiently thankful ? Yet, Leonard, how strange it is that Mr Carnegie should have every paper in his possession requisite to baffle Mrs Beaufort’s enemies : he who was a total stranger to her seven years ago !” said Margaret, thoughtfully.

“Have you never heard your father mention your uncle Basil Sullivan’s attachment to Mrs Beaufort, Margaret ? Many years have elapsed, I understand, since you heard of Mr Sullivan ?”

Margaret started : the blood crimsoned her fore-

head. "What do you mean? Leonard, you look at me, as if you would have me infer more than your words express. It is not possible—no, it cannot be, that Mr Carnegie is my long-lost uncle Basil; and yet, his kindness to me when——Leonard, speak, I beseech you!" exclaimed she, deeply agitated.

"You have guessed rightly: Mr Carnegie is indeed your uncle, Margaret. Deeply resenting Mrs Beaufort's injurious treatment in his younger days, to avenge the slight, he withheld the important papers of which—I have before explained how—he became accidentally possessed. But for Mrs Beaufort's former kindness to you, he would have pursued his vengeance more vindictively still!"

"My father, who so loved my uncle Basil, how great his joy will be! Oh! but it was wrong—unfeeling, to carry resentment so far. Poor Mrs Beaufort! what must her sufferings have been during that interview! And my uncle's motive was revenge!" exclaimed Margaret, shudderingly.

"The motive of Mr Carnegie's disguise was to avenge his own and your mother's wrongs. But he loves you, Margaret: you possess more influence over him than any one; you must, therefore, use it

to soften the harshness and asperity of his character. I should tell you, however, that your uncle has exchanged his name permanently for that of Carnegie."

"And Mrs Beaufort, Leonard,—what was the blight that poisoned her life?" asked Margaret, nearly in a whisper, bending down towards Mr Somerton.

"Her unrequited love for your father!"

"I thought so. Her melancholy history explains that deep dejection which often used to overspread her countenance. How much may sorrow have likewise aggravated the passionate irritability of Mrs Beaufort's nature!" exclaimed Margaret, weeping.

"You pity Mrs Beaufort already, Margaret; yet, unless you interpose, a more terrible blow than any she has endured awaits her. Your uncle has the power to wrest Methwold from her! It appears that the late Mr Beaufort borrowed the sum of thirty thousand pounds from Mr Carnegie, secured by mortgage on the house and lands of Methwold Abbey. In accordance with his scheme of avenging Mrs Beaufort's contemptuous non-acceptance of his addresses, your uncle reserved to himself the right of retaining the Abbey, instead of receiving back the loan in money, at Sir John's death. This fearful

power Mr Carnegie chooses to exercise; and, Margaret, he wishes to bestow upon you, his niece, the munificent gift of Methwold Abbey!"

"Never would I accept such a gift, were it offered a thousand times over! Despoil Mrs Beaufort of her home, and Ginevra—dear Ginevra—of what, at her mother's death, she rightly ought to inherit! Surely, dear Leonard, you think with me on this subject: Methwold, obtained by such means, would prove a curse to us!" exclaimed Margaret, vehemently.

"You cannot doubt that my opinion agrees with your own on this matter; therefore, my own Margaret, judging that such would be your decision, in our joint names I peremptorily declined participating in any scheme still further to oppress Mrs Beaufort: whom I sincerely pity. And that such is your uncle's object is clear, since Mrs Beaufort offered to repay, and even to double, the sum borrowed by her unworthy brother. You see, Margaret, that I doubted not your continued affection. Did I presume too far, dearest?" asked Mr Somerton, as he drew her towards him. "Margaret, tell me, that our long and painful separation has not diminished your love?"

Margaret's eyes dropped under the gaze of passionate love that met her own.

"Until I saw you again, Leonard, and heard your assurances of unabated attachment, I cared not what became of me. Now my happiness is almost too great to bear. Could you know only half what I have suffered, you would not doubt it!" murmured she, hiding her face on his bosom.

"And yet, had you trusted me more, Margaret, our enemies' weapons would have been powerless in their hands! You should have summoned me, whose right it is to protect you, instead of relying on Mr Compton's aid and advice. If you really believed that I neglected your letter, you can neither trust me, nor love me with the affection that I bear you," exclaimed Mr Somerton, reproachfully.

"I thought I had taken such precautions that it was impossible for my letter to miscarry, Leonard. I intrusted it to a person at Methwold; whose gratitude, for several little acts of kindness of mine towards her during a severe illness, I imagined would secure the punctual performance of my request. I was wrong to distrust you; but misery and sickness made me susceptible. I had no

idea to what excesses Mr Braddyll's perfidious designs would carry him. Besides, dear Leonard, after my recovery from my illness, I intended to write again to you ; but that newspaper paragraph, confirmed as it was by the announcement of your approaching marriage from Lady Mary's own lips, made me resolve, as the best thing I could do, to submit to my fate in silence. I cannot express to you the kindness I have received from Mrs Russell. I came to her house more dead than alive, from Mark Braddyll's violence, and the excitement of my flight and escape. Had it not been for George Compton's prompt and intrepid conduct, I never should have escaped the perils that surrounded me ! ” replied Margaret, warmly.

“ We must unite in testifying our gratitude to Mr Compton for so signal a service ; and also try to afford him consolation for the great disappointment which still awaits him, I suspect. Let me hear now the recital of all your adventures since our separation, from your own lips, dearest ! ”

Margaret assented. When she had concluded her relation, Mr Somerton said,

“ We, indeed, owe inexpressible obligation to Mr Compton. Our difficulty will be to manifest our

sense of it to one so amiable and unassuming." Mr Somerton then added, "Miss Grant's jealous umbrage at Mark Braddyll's designs, and her ingenious counterplot to defeat them—which preserved you, my own Margaret—goes far, I confess, to make me palliate her other offences. But I do not think that Mr Carnegie's victory is so complete as he fancies: I have a foreboding that Mark Braddyll will not so easily relinquish his pretensions on Ginevra Marescotti, or the hope of inheriting Mrs Beaufort's wealth. What crimes has not the desire to obtain her riches occasioned!"

"You have not yet told me what you think of Ginevra Marescotti, Leonard?"

"She is most lovely; but her beauty is painful to behold. She looks very like the apparition you once took her for, Margaret; with her fragile figure and transparent complexion. Poor Ginevra has much yet to suffer!" Mr Somerton paused; and then, as the clock struck twelve, said: "Your father will be returning almost immediately, I fear, dearest Margaret; so tell me whether you will not become my mother's guest until you go back to the Holt: which, I understand, is to be your home till you exchange it for Dingley?"

“Your mother! You forget, Leonard? Has she then given her consent to our union? Would Lady Mary indeed receive me?” asked Margaret, with a smile.

“I feel confident she will rejoice to do so. My mother, you know, dearest, had determined that Alice Berners should become my wife; but, in the midst of her disappointment at the failure of her hope, she would, I am persuaded, have welcomed you, even months ago. Now I shall present to her a daughter—not indeed heiress of Methwold Abbey; but one noble enough, on principle, to refuse it when offered! Will you not come to our home, Margaret? My mother will call on Mrs Russell, and fetch you to-morrow, if your answer is such as I hope and expect it to be?” said Mr Somerton, earnestly.

Margaret found it difficult to refuse so urgent an entreaty.

“You must not be displeased, Leonard, or think that I lightly prize your mother’s friendship and affection—for, indeed, I would give much to obtain Lady Mary’s approbation—but I cannot leave my kind friends the Russells, until I return to Woodthorpe. It would appear ungrateful for their care, were I, the

moment brighter prospects dawned, to quit their protection. Mrs Russell comforted me in my sorrow—she must now share my joy. Dear Leonard, do you not approve of this decision?" asked she, caressingly.

"Perhaps you are right; but I know that your decision will be a severe disappointment to my mother. I foresee, however, that Mr Carnegie will be too impatient to see you again, to suffer you to remain away from him long," replied Mr Somerton, reluctantly. "I have already obtained your uncle's assent to our speedy union, Margaret; your father's, I trust, will not long be withholden; and your own, dearest—that most precious boon—you must quickly bestow. Will you not, Margaret?"

She blushed deeply, and tears glistened in her soft eyes; then she murmured a few words, audible only to her lover's ear. The felicity of the present seemed to obliterate the memory of all she had suffered: Mark Braddyll, his violence and treachery, were forgotten. She looked up into the handsome, manly face of her affianced, and read therein the depth and fervour of his love and happiness; and thankful joy at their reunion filled her heart.

For some time afterwards, they sat recounting and speculating on the events that had occurred since

their separation. Alice's penitent, touching letter, which Mr Somerton, though refusing to satisfy Mr Carnegie's curiosity, placed in the hands of his betrothed, drew tears from Margaret's eyes; and before they separated, Margaret obtained from him a promise, that both his own and Sir James Somerton's influence, should be immediately employed to procure Captain Stuart's promotion in his profession.

Margaret would not permit Mr Somerton to remain until her father's return. She feared the effect of the communication she had to make respecting her newly discovered uncle; and she wished also to break Mrs Beaufort's history to him. She knew that both these events would powerfully affect her father, combined with the happy news she had to impart of her own brightened prospects. Mr Somerton agreed in the wisdom of Margaret's decision; the more so as he had yet to inform his parents of the changes which had happened at Methwold. Of his mother's prompt consent to his union with Margaret, he had now little doubt. Lady Mary had before been prepossessed in her favour; and now that Margaret's expectations from her uncle in point of fortune equalled any Alice was formerly supposed to possess, Mr

Somerton felt certain of meeting no further obstacle to his happiness in that quarter.

Margaret was walking restlessly about the room; her cheek flushed to the brightest crimson, and her blue eyes sparkling with excitement, when Mr Desmond returned home. Kneeling, then, beside her father, when they were alone together, Margaret gently and cautiously related the important tidings she had to unfold: and well was it that she had resolved herself to undertake the task, for Mr Desmond's emotion was too intense to meet other eyes than his daughter's. More than half the night she sat by her father; and at length her gentle voice soothed him, not in vain. Then Margaret retired to her own apartment, humbly to pour forth her own thanksgivings to Him who had so wonderfully converted her past affliction into joy.

Early the following morning, the messenger arrived at Mr Russell's, bringing Mr Carnegie's letter to Mr Desmond, and likewise one from her uncle to Margaret. There was also a packet from Mrs Beaufort, enclosing, besides a letter written by herself, an affectionate note from Ginevra, and the communication Alice left for Margaret before her departure from the Abbey. Mrs Beaufort's letter was kind, though sad; and she alluded, with pleasure, to the hope of

soon meeting Margaret at the Holt. As for Mr Carnegie's letter, it made Margaret laugh and cry by turns : it commenced by a sound rating for what he designated "her senseless folly" in suffering herself to be beguiled by Lilian Grant's cunning, to hide herself from her friends for so many weeks ; Mr Carnegie then proceeded to descant, in a triumphant strain, on Mark Braddyll, and the signal discomfiture of his designs. Not one word, however, did the letter contain about Mrs Beaufort or Ginevra ; but it concluded by desiring Margaret to set off with her father, without delay, for the Holt ; which she was henceforth to consider her home, until she exchanged it for a happier one.

Margaret was still absorbed by her letters,—Mrs Russell, with her kind, gladsome face, radiant in smiles, sitting opposite to her, and watching with intense interest every fleeting emotion,—when a carriage suddenly stopping at the gate, made them both eagerly glance towards the window.

Their early visiter was Lady Mary Somerton ; and soon her ladyship entered the room, escorted by her son.

CHAPTER XI.

MARK BRADDYLL, meanwhile, after his summary expulsion from the Abbey, retired, for the better arrangement of his future designs, to the house on the coast, where he had conveyed Margaret Desmond. Even his hardened effrontery shrank from confronting the injured Lilian, and encountering the storm of reproaches his perfidy towards her deserved. Yet Mr Braddyll felt that it was essential to his interests to soothe, flatter, and once more delude her into becoming his accomplice in his scheme of vengeance on Mrs Beaufort, and the act of violence he still meditated towards Ginevra Marescotti.

Undaunted by the signal defeat he had sustained, base designs of settled revenge—conducting in their issue to his own ultimate triumph—agitated Mr Braddyll's mind. Ginevra once in his power, he knew

that he could defy his enemies: for he still felt that through her daughter he could henceforth rule and subdue that proud, haughty woman, who had so keenly taunted him. Darker schemes, however, mingled with Mark Braddyll's calculations.

His future sway over Mrs Beaufort was dependent on Ginevra; but the latter's health was precarious in the extreme: the very fright, occasioned by the success of the violent measures which he contemplated, might abridge her days; and what chance would there then be of his eventual accession to wealth and honour, should Mrs Beaufort survive her daughter? Could he endure to be afterwards derided and mocked by Agatha Beaufort? to be scorned and jeered at by the world, and finally deprived of the reward of his intrigues? So deeply was Mark Braddyll already steeped in crime, that the terrible thoughts instantly presenting themselves caused no pang of remorse or affright in his mind.

With gloomy brow, and a face paled by the very intensity of the malignant feelings at work within, Mr Braddyll sat for hours pondering on his wicked projects. When once ascendant in his mind, their execution seemed hourly attended with less difficulty and peril; and more and more, as he yielded himself to

their sway, a secret and diabolical agency appeared alive within, urging him onwards, and proffering a prompt solution of every doubt. A voice seemed perpetually whispering in his ear, that Agatha Beaufort's death must be compassed before that of her daughter, ere any permanent result could ensue from the bold, reckless deed he meditated: the thought haunted his dreams, and became the subject of his daily reveries, until at length the idea gained consistency, and its achievement was boldly resolved.

But Lilian Grant, the detested, hated Lilian, must again become the agent of his diabolical schemes; and the almost hopeless task must be attempted of allaying her jealous fury, and winning her once more unconsciously to serve his designs: even to the destruction of her hope, that he knew she still cherished, of becoming his wife. Mr Braddyll did not shrink from the enterprise; its very difficulty and peril seemed to inspire him with additional energy: so, after a sojourn of two days at the Nook, he determined on presenting himself before the exasperated Lilian.

Miss Grant, meantime, had passed this interval in alternate paroxysms of mingled rage and passionate grief; but from the moment when, while in Mrs Beaufort's presence, she learned the full mea-

sure and magnitude of Mr Braddyll's treacherous duplicity towards herself, the deadly desire for vengeance awoke in her heart. While trifling with, and using Lilian Grant as the mere tool of his villanous designs, Mark Braddyll acted without a due knowledge of the desperate daring of her character: her powers of dissimulation surpassed his own. After Mr Braddyll's return, Lilian, with execrable art, long refused to be propitiated. Tears, frantic reproaches, and furious passion, were in turns made subservient to the revenge filling her heart.

It was Mark Braddyll's interest to conciliate her. With similar deceit, therefore, penitent words, plausible excuses for his past conduct, and language of passionate endearment, fell from his lips. Lilian at last appeared to be mollified, and even propitiated and won by his entreaties. With consummate address she then drew from her apparently contrite lover his future designs, entering into his schemes with alacrity, and feigning to believe that his sole object was, for her sake, to rid himself of Ginevra Marescotti, who, after her proposed successful abduction from the Abbey, they were jointly to convey abroad, and dispose of. When Mr Braddyll expatiated on the

power he still wielded over Mrs Beaufort, Lilian smiled approval, and readily promised to perform his bidding in all things with zeal and diligence.

Not a muscle moved in her face as Mr Braddyll then, after this assurance, composedly unfolded his diabolical scheme for Mrs Beaufort's destruction. Mr Thomson had been regularly in the habit of supplying the latter with a powerful restorative medicine, a small quantity of which Mrs Beaufort daily took mingled with water; and also with sedative draughts for Ginevra, who frequently had recourse to them, especially after suffering from one of her attacks. Mr Braddyll therefore proposed that Lilian should possess herself of this packet of medicine, when ready prepared by her uncle, withdraw the phial intended for Mrs Beaufort, and substitute in its stead another, which he would provide. At the same time he bade her double the strength of Ginevra's opiates. All this Lilian solemnly promised to do; though at the same time she was well convinced that Mr Braddyll's object in carrying off Ginevra Marescotti was to compel the poor girl, as he would have done Margaret, to bestow her hand upon him; and the poison sent to Mrs Beaufort was

to compass her death before her daughter's, that there might be no question as to his future and speedy possession of Methwold Abbey.

Mr Braddyll, however, was endowed with as much present wiliness as Lilian herself, and carefully abstained from delivering into her hands the phial he destined for Mrs Beaufort, until the afternoon of the day when he learned, by casually inquiring of Mr Thomson, that the latter expected Cartaret to call for the parcel. Miss Grant then went to her uncle in the surgery, and after some conversation on trifling subjects, nonchalantly took up the medicine, which was lying on the counter, directed for Mrs Beaufort, and requested permission to open the parcel, to enclose a note. Mr Thomson, who knew little, or rather nothing, of the late *fracas* at the Abbey, made no objection. Lilian, therefore, effectually to lull any misgiving in Mr Braddyll's mind, waited until, under some pretext, but in reality to watch her movements, he entered the surgery; then she deliberately took up the parcel, and passing close by him, walked away with it. She soon returned, and with a meaning glance at Mr Braddyll, replaced the packet; never losing sight of it until she had seen it safely delivered into Cartaret's hands. This

done, Lilian would have retreated to her room. Mr Braddyll, however, closely followed her from the surgery, and beckoned her into the garden. Reluctantly enough Lilian obeyed, as, independently of other motives, one of those changes of weather so common in an autumnal day, and an English climate, had occurred, and a slight rain was falling.

“Well, Lilian, is it done? Have you served me faithfully this time?” asked Mr Braddyll, hastily.

“Ay, better than you imagine! You will find, Mark, that this time I have served you so well and effectually, that you will never have occasion to trust me more in the matter!” replied Lilian, in a low, subdued tone.

A frown wrinkled Mr Braddyll’s brow: there was a sullen stubbornness in Lilian Grant’s tones, which kindled his suspicion.

“Answer me, girl! Equivocate at your peril! This time we will come to the point. According to your solemn promise, have you substituted the phial that I gave you two hours ago, for the bottle of medicine which your uncle is in the habit of sending to Agatha Beaufort? and have you, as you professed yourself willing and able to do, doubled the

strength of the opium draughts taken nightly by Ginevra Marescotti?" asked Mr Braddyll, seizing Lilian's arm with a grasp that made her shrink with pain.

"I have made the exchange: you yourself saw the parcel delivered into Cartaret's hand, when she called for the medicine this afternoon. If you doubt my word,—see!" and Lilian held up, between her finger and thumb, a small bottle, containing a clear, limpid fluid.

"You abstracted that from the parcel your uncle intrusted to you, and replaced it by the phial which you received from me?" demanded Mr Braddyll, significantly.

Lilian silently bent her head; then hastily concealed the phial in her bosom.

"You must pardon my roughness, Lilian. We shall see now, when everything else has failed, whether our present resource will not lower Agatha Beaufort's cursed pride. Farewell now, my angel!" exclaimed Mark Braddyll, with a prolonged and repulsive laugh.

"Stay, Mark! I have despatched, at your bidding, a slow and deadly poison to Mrs Beaufort; the Italian girl, who would wrest wealth from us,

will probably to-morrow night, by your command, be torn from her home. For what benefit to myself have you compelled me to become your accomplice in this violence?" asked Lilian, in a low, hissing whisper.

"Benefit! Pshaw, Lilian, you weary my patience. Another sunset, and Ginevra Marescotti will open her fair eyes under a foreign sky. The fright will most probably kill her,—if not, the rude discipline of a convent will. Thus one, or rather *the sole* great obstacle to our ultimate possession of her mother's wealth will be removed, and our own union must follow. You will not comprehend! Go now, then, and leave me; but after to-morrow hold yourself in readiness to embark at any hour on the ensuing night! Farewell, Lilian!" and without vouchsafing another word to his companion, Mr Braddyll re-entered the house.

A look of intense loathing and abhorrence stole over Lilian's pale face as she watched his retreating steps.

"Fool! most infatuated, as well as wicked! He thinks that he has deceived me again! thinks that *I* believed his lying words, when he swore that my interest alone prompted the crime he urged me to

perpetrate! Now for retaliation, signal and triumphant!" muttered Lilian; then she hastily entered the house, and retreated to her own room.

At dusk Lilian quitted her chamber again, cautiously stole from her uncle's house, and hurriedly traversed several streets, until she paused before the building where the county magistrates periodically assembled. The business of the day had just concluded, and the bench was on the point of separating, as Lilian despatched an urgent message, praying for an immediate and private interview with Mr Carnegie. Her request was granted. Lilian's conference with him lasted for upwards of an hour, or more; and it took place in the presence of another magistrate, whom Mr Carnegie, after hearing from Miss Grant a short statement of her errand, immediately summoned. Lilian then precipitately retired; but, instead of returning home, she took the road to Methwold Abbey.

As darkness stole over the heavens, the rain had increased; and when Lilian entered the park, the wind, blowing in sharp, sudden gusts, shook down showers of leaves and water-drops from the trees, on the grass beneath, already laden with heavy moisture. The moon had risen, but was obscured by vapoury

clouds, and only shone out at intervals, rendering the aspect of the night still more desolate and dreary. Now and then the note of a bird sounded from the covert of some leafy thicket, mingling with the shrill rustle of the leaves in the wind, and the gurgling of the little brook which supplied the lake in the front of the mansion with water, now swelled, by the falling torrents of rain, to double its ordinary volume.

Steadily Lilian walked onwards, at a rapid pace, without defence or shelter against the violence of the rain ; while the wind, swaying and upheaving the huge elastic branches of the cedar trees, beneath which her path lay, dashed down showers of water, drenching through and through her light summer attire. At intervals she paused, and appeared to be listening with intense eagerness ; then, quickly putting back the masses of hair driven over her face by the wind, she continued her progress.

At length Lilian paused beneath a large elm tree, standing alone in the centre of a plot of green sward. As she stood, a gleam of moonlight shone upon her pale and haggard face ; yet the menace glowing in her dark eyes, her livid, rigidly closed lips, and the swelling nostril, as she leant, panting for breath, against the tree, indicated a degree of mental excite-

ment fearful to contemplate. At length she bowed her head over her clasped hands, and for some minutes remained passive, though her frame shook convulsively.

Presently Lilian again raised her head, and, with both hands, wrung the dripping rain from her hair, her cloak, and her gown ; then, crossing her arms on her bosom, she resumed her former attitude. For five—for ten minutes she remained thus, motionless, insensible of the gathering obscurity, and the noiseless solitude of all around her ; then, enveloping herself again in the folds of her cloak, Lilian stepped from beneath the tree, and, advancing to an open space, stood for many minutes, gazing eagerly and steadily about. Nothing stirred : the sullen moan of the wind, as it drifted amongst the leaves and boughs, was the only sound which met her ear. Lilian then bounded forwards in the direction of the mansion. All things were dark and silent around it ; and the house, with its façade of dull grey stone, stretched before her, looking gloomy and grim in the uncertain moonlight. Lilian stealthily crept along on the turf, immediately beneath the windows, keeping close under the shadow of the house, until she

reached the corridor door, which she knew was generally allowed to remain unbolted during the day.

Here Lilian paused, for the thought occurred that the door most probably, at this late hour, would be locked ; and how, then, would she gain admission to the house ? For a moment she stood, with her hand resting on the handle, fascinated, as it were, by the dread of finding her apprehension realized. At length the door yielded to her pressure ; Lilian softly entered, traversed the corridor, and stood in the large, lofty hall. Instinctively her eye rested on the last offering she had received from Mark Braddyll—a cluster of white lilies, that he had given to her on the morning of Captain Stuart's visit ; and which, in her hurry to impart this important piece of intelligence to him, she had hastily placed in one of the porphyry vases standing on the buffet, and, since that period, forgotten and disregarded by her. With involuntary impulse Lilian seized the flowers, and dashed them to the ground ; then passed onwards, until she reached the library door. Voices sounded from within. Lilian's heart beat high, her lips moved convulsively, and she momentarily rested her head against the framework of the door. Soon she

rallied again ; then, with erect carriage, she boldly opened the door, and entered the room.

It was brilliantly lighted ; and Mrs Beaufort and her daughter were its sole occupants. The former was restlessly pacing up and down ; and, as ever and anon the light shone on her face, it displayed an expression of restless sadness and gravity, which all Ginevra's efforts during the day had failed to dissipate. Ginevra reposed on a sofa near the table : she was listlessly turning over the pages of a book ; for the joyous elation with which she hailed her recovered freedom, was damped by the chill gloom of the night, and her mother's melancholy.

At the sound of the opening door, Mrs Beaufort paused inquiringly, evidently displeased at so abrupt an intrusion. Lilian steadily advanced to the table, and placed herself so that the strong light, pouring downwards from the chandelier, fell full upon her figure ; then she cast away her cloak, and stood in the self-possessed attitude so habitual to her, though her face became pallid almost to ghastliness. Ginevra slightly screamed, and sprang from the sofa to her mother's side.

"Lilian Grant ! how is it that you presume to present yourself before me again ? Why have you

thus artfully entered my house, to force yourself into my presence! Speak quickly, girl, or take the consequences of your insolent intrusion!" exclaimed Mrs Beaufort, sternly; first slowly approaching Lilian, then directing her steps towards the bell rope.

In a moment Lilian threw herself wildly before Mrs Beaufort.

"Stay! You know not what you do! Listen to me: only hear the statement I came to make, and afterwards do with me as you will!"

Mrs Beaufort paused: she looked doubtfully, irresolutely on Lilian, who stood now with her face buried in her hands, silent, though cowering again with agitation. Ginevra glanced imploringly at her mother; then advancing, she gently laid her hand on Lilian's arm, and led her to a chair.

"You shall be heard. Compose yourself, Miss Grant. Whatever revelation you have to make, my mother will listen to it. Come nearer to the fire—you are shivering with cold!" said Ginevra kindly, taking the cloak from Lilian's arm.

Slowly Miss Grant turned her dark eyes on the young girl, whose pitying voice strove thus to reassure her: their fierce expression appeared subdued

as she gazed. She then hastily rose, and approached Mrs Beaufort.

“ Compassion I will not endure ! Spurned as I have been by you, madam, I could have avenged, terribly avenged, the ignominy with which a few days ago you cast me from your presence ! Know that your life, and that of your cherished daughter, have been in my power ! You owe me, then, toleration at least, if not thanks ; and I have earned the right to stand before you ! ” exclaimed Lilian, excitedly.

“ I do not comprehend your meaning, Miss Grant. I can gather nothing from such incoherent words,” replied Mrs Beaufort, coldly and contemptuously.

Her manner seemed to sting Lilian to the quick.

“ But for me, I repeat, one day hence would have found you childless ! ” rejoined she, vehemently. To-morrow night your child was to have been stolen from you, conveyed from the kingdom, and forced—ay, compelled—to become the bride of that villain, Mark Braddyll. The plot for her abduction is organized, and he thinks still to achieve it ! He dreams not of the vengeance he has raised in my heart—that I, too, can feign—can lead him step by step to destruction, even as he has lured me ! ”

Lilian paused ; the breath came thick and fast from between her parched and swollen lips.

Instinctively Mrs Beaufort retreated towards Ginevra.

“Mark Braddyll again ! Does he still dare aspire to my daughter’s hand ? Villain ! Speak, I command you, Lilian Grant ; and should your avowal prove ample enough to defeat and punish his lawless intent, a pecuniary reward, great as even *you* can count, shall be yours !”

Lilian laughed ; but it was a laugh so reckless and hollow, that Mrs Beaufort started.

“Aid me to avenge myself, madam ! All your wealth would be as nothing to me now, in comparison to it !” She paused, hastily glanced at the time-piece, and then continued rapidly : “Your life, madam, was to have been immediately sacrificed, in order that Methwold might become your daughter’s. Her health, I am told, is precarious : if Mr Braddyll’s scheme for making her his wife, therefore, had succeeded, his villany would have been in a great measure foiled, had her decease ensued before your own. Supposing me still his miserable dupe and accomplice, Mr Braddyll directed me to abstract from the parcel, weekly sent to you by my uncle, the drops

intended for your use, and substitute instead a phial containing a slow poison of the most deadly description; at the same time, he further desired me to double the strength of the draughts nightly taken by your daughter, in order that, during the probable stupor that would ensue, we might the more readily and successfully carry his design into execution of stealing her from your roof. To achieve this, he has secured the aid of bold and dauntless confederates. Your daughter's apartment was to have been entered by the window in the dead of the night: his subsequent measures were also planned with a skill and craft rendering rescue almost hopeless. The failure of his design on Margaret Desmond sufficiently demonstrated to Mr Braddyll the folly of delays. The day after to-morrow we were to quit England: for *I* was to accompany him abroad, as Mark Braddyll's triumph would have been incomplete without a victim to crouch at his feet! You shrink from me, signora? Yes, my desperation has been your salvation!" exclaimed the excited Lilian, perceiving that Ginevra slightly retreated as she advanced. Tears were streaming down Ginevra's cheeks.

"Nay, think not so! However tardy your repentance and culpable its motives, you have been the

means, under Providence, of preserving my precious mother's life, and myself from a fate too terrible to contemplate!" exclaimed Ginevra, extending her hand. "Oh, Miss Grant, I conjure you, vanquish these dreadful promptings of vengeance. Leave Mark Braddyll to the fate his own deeds have prepared; believe me, retribution will be signal even as you could hope! Mother, speak to her! Tell Lilian Grant that, in consideration of what she has now done, you pardon the past! Drive her not to despair!" exclaimed Ginevra, beseechingly, clinging to Mrs Beaufort, whose features seemed rigid with horror.

"No! He has scorned, mocked, and deluded me with cruel deception! I have avenged myself already beyond the power of recall!" continued Lilian, exultingly. "Listen, madam: this afternoon, before coming hither, I deposed on solemn oath to the facts that you have just heard, in the presence of Mr Carnegie and another magistrate. In their hands I have placed the poisoned draught given to me by Mark Braddyll; with a hasty statement of some parts of his design, which, before I feigned to be propitiated by his falsehoods, I drew from him. The opium draughts I doubly drugged according to my promise, and de-

livered to Cartaret, in testimony of the truth of my statement. You will speedily be called upon to deliver them up. But all danger now is past—and a felon's fate is his who so bitterly wronged me! Yes! I will ruin his ambitious projects, and blast his reputation; then, perhaps, I may kneel to Mark Braddyll for forgiveness!" continued Lilian, in a low, whispered murmur to herself.

The sight of the strong anguish depicted on Lilian's countenance roused Mrs Beaufort. The unhappy girl had thrown herself on her knees; her hands rested on a chair, and supported her head. Mrs Beaufort advanced and stood beside her.

"Rise, Miss Grant. Be calm, I entreat. You have acted rashly, wickedly, and must strive now patiently to endure its penalty. You ought not to have done as you have without previously consulting me; but now, as you did so act, I will make no effort to avert the just retribution which has at length overtaken Mark Braddyll. He contemplated a terrible, cowardly crime; let him therefore submit to its punishment. You have, however, rescued us from fearful peril; for this, therefore, whatever may have been the secret impulse prompting your action, I shall ever feel grateful. Tell me, therefore, frankly

whether it is in my power to serve you—serve you, mark well, Lilian—in furthering your amendment and true repentance ; not by assuaging the dreadful longing for revenge which possesses you ! ” said Mrs Beaufort, firmly and impressively.

A smile of bitter irony curled Lilian’s lip.

“ You cannot, madam. I may have preserved your life : still, in so doing, my motive was to serve my own revenge better ! With greater impunity Mark Braddyll might have thrust his hand into a viper’s nest than so have tampered with Lilian Grant ! Think you that I came hither, as your words would imply, to crave mercy for him, or to repent so speedily of the deliberate resolve of days ? ” Miss Grant suddenly paused : then springing up, she hastened to the window, and appeared to listen for some time with eager intensity.

The excitement of the scene had now nearly overpowered Ginevra ; and she looked so faint and ill that Mrs Beaufort hastily crossed the room, and rang the bell loudly. The sound recalled Lilian’s attention to what was passing in the room. Hurriedly she snatched up her cloak, and enveloped herself in its heavy folds, evidently intending to depart.

A hum of voices now sounded in the distance.

Mrs Beaufort anxiously fixed her eyes on the door. It silently opened at length, and Mr Carnegie and another individual entered the room. A slight cry escaped Lilian's blanched lips, and she bounded towards the door. Mr Carnegie's keen eyes, however, riveted themselves upon her; at a gesture from him her flight was intercepted.

"Secure that person. You will be responsible for her appearance before me to-morrow morning!" said he, calmly and emphatically, addressing his companion.

The police-officer, for such in reality was the personage who accompanied Mr Carnegie, immediately placed himself by Lilian's side. For a second her eyes flashed scornfully and defiantly; then, in sullen silence, she suffered herself to be led unresistingly from the room.

No sooner had Lilian Grant abruptly left his presence, after her previous interview that afternoon, than Mr Carnegie became sensible of the error he had committed in suffering her to escape. Promptly, therefore, he caused her movements to be watched; and after remaining in Denbridge until he saw the warrant despatched for Mark Braddyll's arrest, he

followed immediately to Methwold, and there consigned Miss Grant to strict surveillance under her uncle's roof until the morrow.

During the ensuing night, Mr Carnegie remained at the Abbey ; from whence, on the following morning, he repaired again to Denbridge : as, to his intense annoyance, he received an early communication, apprizing him that the search for Mr Braddyll had been unsuccessful.

By some means, Mark Braddyll's suspicions had been excited by Miss Grant's manner, after he had so rashly placed himself in her power. Her subsequent interview with Mr Carnegie, it would appear, was detected by him ; for when the officers presented themselves at Mr Thomson's house to execute the warrant for his detention, until the truth of the charge against him could be further investigated, he was nowhere to be found. A letter, however, was discovered in his room, addressed to Miss Grant, filled with terrible menaces, and taunts the most cruel and cutting that malice could dictate. The letter was immediately shown to Lilian. While she perused it, every tinge of colour fled from her cheeks ; her bloodless lips were sternly compressed ; and she

displayed no emotion when informed that constabls were gone in pursuit of Mr Braddyll to his house on the coast: whither it was supposed he had taken refuge, with a view of escaping from the kingdom.

Far different, however, from the hardened insensibility Lilian then displayed, was the agonized eagerness of her manner, when late in the evening of the same day her uncle entered the chamber in which she was still detained, to impart to her the intelligence which had just reached Denbridge. It appeared that Mr Braddyll, and his associates at The Nook, offered a most determined resistance to the efforts of the officers to execute the commission intrusted to them. His hot southern blood, roused to a pitch of intemperate fury at the failure of his bold designs; maddened, also, by the open disgrace, and the anticipation of the shameful punishment by which his meditated crimes would be expiated—for he was conscious how thoroughly Lilian Grant could prove his guilt—he resolved to make a desperate effort to evade his fate, if only to wreak vengeance on her head for his betrayal.

Aware of the infamous character of the place and its inmates, the officers, however, were well prepared for the resistance they met with in the discharge of

their duty ; and, after a hard contest, an entrance into the house was effected. A sharp skirmish ensued : shots were exchanged ; and, in the heat of the fight, Mr Braddyll, while in the act of inciting his colleagues to still more vigorous resistance, received the contents of a pistol in his side. He immediately fell : his companions then surrendered ; and surgical aid was procured with as little delay as possible. Human aid, however, proved unavailing : Mr Braddyll survived the fatal fray only a few hours.

In silent stupor Lilian Grant listened to this recital. In her most vindictive access of passionate jealousy and revenge, she had never contemplated Mark Braddyll's death, or her total severance for ever from him, to whom, though he had scorned and repaid her devotion by the blackest ingratitude, she still clung with fond attachment. Her eyes fixed themselves rigidly and vacantly on Mr Thomson's face ; then a piercing scream escaped her lips, and she fell senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN the circumstances of Mark Braddyll's death were communicated to Mrs Beaufort, she was deeply affected, and the melancholy which oppressed her seemed thenceforth to augment. The thought of the swift and sudden retribution which, in the prime of life, had cut short his career of wickedness; and her own escape from the peril that had menaced her, appeared so miraculous and awful, that, while profoundly grateful for her preservation, Mrs Beaufort's mind shrank from dwelling on the past. Her strong masculine intellect, so long invincible against the inroads of anxiety and suspense, at length yielded; and now that she had cast from her the reserve which had annihilated both happiness and self-respect, she sank back, as it were, powerless from the reaction. A deep-settled despondency, which she had neither energy nor will to combat, oppressed her: her mind

appeared exhausted, and every faculty prostrate. Seclusion she sought as systematically as ever; and Ginevra's tears and endearments alone appeared to have power to move her, or win back a smile.

In Mrs Beaufort's sorrow, Mr Carnegie's animosity vanished, and he was perpetually at hand to advise and aid her on every occasion. All these varied attentions, on his part, Mrs Beaufort suffered with passive indifference; indeed, the very effort to speak, or to issue the slightest direction, seemed irksome. Ginevra was in despair: she spent her time in alternate fits of weeping; or, when excluded from her mother's apartment, in wandering about the grounds, frequently with Mr Carnegie as her companion; who scarcely allowed a day to elapse without paying her a visit. Feeling how great a consolation and support Margaret's presence would be in her affliction, Ginevra, after first obtaining Mrs Beaufort's consent, earnestly besought Mr Carnegie to permit his niece's return to the Abbey. Mr Carnegie promptly assented; yet, apprehensive of the effect a sudden communication of the events of the last two days might have on his niece, in her delicate state of health, he wrote a detail of what had occurred to Mr Somerton; begging him to break the past to Margaret, and then escort

her back, with her father's consent, to the Abbey. At the same time, Mr Carnegie requested Mr Desmond to delay his journey to the Holt; from a kindly consideration of the probable shock it would occasion Mrs Beaufort to hear that her cousin was staying in the neighbourhood of Methwold.

As soon as this letter reached Mr Somerton, he hastened to Mr Russell's house, and imparted its contents to Margaret. Shocked beyond measure, after perusing the letter, she gave it to her father, and earnestly entreated his permission to her return to Methwold. The haste in which Mr Carnegie wrote, and his laconic, though expressive, description of Ginevra's distress, admitted not a doubt in Margaret's mind as to the expediency of her immediate departure; besides, at the recital of Mrs Beaufort's distress and suffering, all the kindly sentiments and attachment which she had formerly felt for her, revived in tenfold force.

No less anxious for his daughter's departure, than she was herself to be gone, Mr Desmond cheerfully committed her to Mr Somerton's care; and a very few hours elapsed before Margaret was on her road to the Abbey.

It was quite dark when she arrived there. As she

approached the mansion, its silence and gloom—for not a light was visible at any of the windows—struck a pang of anxious foreboding to Margaret's heart ; but, sustained by Mr Somerton's sanguine hopes, she tried to repel her fears. Margaret eagerly sprang from the carriage when it stopped beneath the porch ; and while Mr Somerton gave some directions to the servants, she entered the house. The hall was brilliantly lighted as usual ; but not a soul was visible : its noiseless vastness, as she lingered, had something appalling to Margaret's excited fancy ; and she hastily passed on to the library, where she thought it probable that Ginevra might be.

Mr Carnegie was sitting at the table poring over a newspaper ; his back was towards the door. Margaret hesitated, then softly advanced, and threw her arms round the old man, ere he was aware of her presence. Mr Carnegie started,—looked into her face,—then clasped her to his heart, while tears of joy and emotion ran down his cheeks as he murmured her mother's name. There, beneath the proud roof of Methwold Abbey, from whence years before he had been expelled with contumely, Basil Sullivan received and embraced his niece, the only child of Agnes.

Time, the avenger of injustice, had brought him thither again : yet reparation for the scorn and insult with which his suit had been received, was long withholden from Basil Sullivan ; surely, because his revenge for the injury had been sought in the spirit of malice and fierce hatred. Agnes Sullivan, likewise, had suffered too, and expiated her weak betrayal of her friend's confidence and trust : yet, light was her doom in comparison with the bitter retribution poured on the head of her who had avenged her wrongs in a spirit of such harsh, unrelenting bitterness ; and who, for the gratification of her implacable pride, had been guilty of the unnatural deed of abandoning her child.

Long and earnestly did Mr Carnegie and his niece converse ; for Mr Somerton left them together. Every incident relative to his beloved sister, her uncle made Margaret repeat. He told her then of his unsuccessful search to discover her father on his first arrival from India ; though his desire to hear of him arose not from a wish to make himself known, but merely to place Mr Desmond at ease in regard to pecuniary circumstances : as to have avowed himself, would have defeated his schemes relative to Mrs Beaufort. From several observations her uncle made respecting past events, Margaret also discovered who was the

generous donor of those anonymous gifts, which had occasioned her, at once, so much pain, excitement, and pleasure; and great was her delight at finding her doubts so satisfactorily solved.

Mr Carnegie then related to his niece, in detail, all the occurrences of the last few days. He spoke of Mrs Beaufort with a sympathy and consideration astonishing to Margaret: no harsh comments on her past conduct mingled with the old man's reminiscences. Now that she was so thoroughly humbled, and stood in need of his friendship and aid, Mr Carnegie's animosity had subsided; and his voice faltered painfully, while he related to Margaret the history of that interview, in which Agatha Beaufort, then young and arrogant in the consciousness of her matchless charms, had dissipated for ever his hope of earthly happiness.

Mr Carnegie's revenge for this cutting scorn had been accomplished: not however in the way that he, in the bitterness of his heart, anticipated; but by the interposition of an overruling Providence his enmity had been the means of rescuing its intended victim from misery indescribably great; so that even his vengeance became an instrument of blessing to her, instead of a curse. It was true that Methwold Abbey

was his own; yet, strangely enough, Mr Carnegie never once expatiated on that topic to his niece, or even appeared to remember it. Perhaps the lesson of disinterestedness and justice taught him by Mr Somerton, when he refused so splendid a gift in the name of his betrothed wife, had sunk deep into the old man's heart.

How much longer Margaret and her uncle might have sat conversing together, it is impossible to say; but suddenly the door opened, and Ginevra threw herself into Margaret's arms. Long, very long, did she hang on her friend's neck, kissing away the tears upon Margaret's cheeks, and dashing them from her own eyes; her melodious voice murmuring all the time words of welcome. Then, with her arm linked in Margaret's, Ginevra led her to her mother's room.

Mrs Beaufort was sitting alone, reading. On perceiving Margaret, she rose, and affectionately embraced her; then for a few minutes the memory of the past seemed to recur to her mind with overwhelming vividness, and she was strongly agitated. Mrs Beaufort afterwards conversed for a short time on various topics; carefully, however, avoiding all painful allusions; then she relapsed into silence. Margaret could not restrain her tears when she saw the

alteration a few months had made in Mrs Beaufort's appearance : the varied emotions which used to play on her still beautiful face had departed, and her lofty brow, once so bright with intellect, was now clouded and sad.

From the time of Margaret's return to the Abbey, however, a slight improvement was visible in Mrs Beaufort's health. She was never allowed, by her two watchful nurses, to remain alone, except on her own peremptory request ; and Margaret's lively spirits were constantly on the alert to amuse and distract her attention : yet, though these and other resources were lavished to restore Mrs Beaufort's usual vigorous tone of mind and body, every expedient seemed to fail.

The first eagerly expressed wish Mrs Beaufort uttered was, that proper steps should be taken to empower herself and her daughter legally to assume the family patronymic of Beaufort : the very name of Marescotti, uttered in her hearing, caused Mrs Beaufort an exquisite thrill of anguish. After a short delay, due permission was obtained, and Mrs Beaufort once more found herself authorized to retain the name she so fondly cherished as her own.

Mrs Beaufort's next act was to appoint an early

day for an interview with Mr Carnegie, in order to a settlement of his alleged claim on the Abbey. In vain the latter attempted to defer the interview until she was better able to endure it: Mrs Beaufort persisted in her intention; and the greater Mr Carnegie's disinclination appeared to be to bring the matter to a crisis, the more resolved did she become to suffer no delay.

To calm her excitement on the subject, and to allay the agitation and suspense, so injurious in her state of health, with which she contemplated the being called upon to surrender the home of her ancestors, Mr Carnegie one morning sent Mrs Beaufort, by Margaret's hand, the original deed so recklessly signed by Mr Beaufort; in virtue of which, he alone could claim dominion over the Abbey, or demand back any portion of the loan he had advanced. Deeply as Mrs Beaufort was moved by this proof of implicit reliance in her honour, she was not turned from her purpose, but more urgently than ever summoned Mr Carnegie to her presence. Could the latter, however, have seen the silent tears shed by that haughty woman, as she reflected on his act—and humbly owned to herself, that the heart, once so loftily scorned, was not the despicable gift she, in her

pride and arrogance, had imagined—the last drop of bitterness would surely have been subdued in his nature.

Again, therefore, Mr Somerton was summoned by special invitation into Mrs Beaufort's presence, on the morning upon which she expected Mr Carnegie's visit. The latter, however, she first admitted to a private interview; and—to judge by the flush which glowed on Mrs Beaufort's cheek, and Mr Carnegie's silent, pensive demeanour, when they both entered the apartment where Ginevra, Margaret, and Mr Somerton awaited them—their conference must have been of an agitating nature. There, in the presence of all, Mr Carnegie destroyed the deed which gave him power over the Beaufort patrimony; characterizing it as unjust, and obtained in an unworthy spirit of revenge; declaring also that, in expiation of the motive, the sum so secured was justly forfeit. Mrs Beaufort, however, refused to allow of such a settlement of the question, and properly and firmly insisted upon returning the money borrowed by her brother. Mr Carnegie, in his most sturdy tones of resolute decision, declined to accept back a farthing; but the old leaven of pride still actuated Mrs Beaufort sufficiently to make her persist in her refusal to owe the

roof that sheltered her to a former enemy, however repentant and placable. It was at length resolved, at Mr Carnegie's suggestion, and with universal consent, that, as some compensation was due to Alice Berners for the disappointment she had experienced in losing Mrs Beaufort's wealth, the sum, apparently so unacceptable to every person present, should be bestowed upon her. It might obviate the difficulties attending her future union with Captain Stuart : or, at least, would place her in affluence for the remainder of her life.

Margaret and Mr Somerton cordially as they assented to the gift, doubted whether it would now bestow happiness on Alice, or even excite more than a passing feeling of pleasure ; however so noble an independence might have been before hailed by her with triumphant joy. Sir James, in compliance with his son's request, had made many inquiries after Captain Stuart, and strongly recommended him in the proper quarters, as a most meritorious officer, worthy of the highest patronage ; when the baronet was abruptly informed, greatly to his annoyance, that his protégé had recently sold his commission, and quitted the army, and that nothing more was known of Captain Stuart's subsequent proceedings.

Six weeks thus elapsed ; at the expiration of which, Mrs Beaufort was sufficiently recovered to resume, in some degree, her usual occupations ; though she still refused to admit visitors to the Abbey. As winter approached, Ginevra's health again exhibited symptoms of decline ; and the greatest care and watchfulness were requisite to protect her against the cold. Mrs Beaufort, therefore, for this and many other personal reasons, resolved once again to break up her establishment at Methwold, and reside for some years in a warmer climate, as a last chance of re-establishing her daughter's health. Though Margaret, and all her friends deeply lamented this resolution, not one could oppose, or even express themselves surprised at, Mrs Beaufort's intentions. She had suffered so keenly at the Abbey, and it had also become associated in her mind with painful and terrible recollections : besides, Mrs Beaufort naturally shrank from mingling at present with her former friends ; and her spirits continued so depressed, that change of air and scene seemed indispensable. It was, therefore, decided, that, immediately after Margaret's marriage, Mrs Beaufort and her daughter should proceed to Lisbon.

Mr Somerton meanwhile resigned himself as courageously as he could to the loss of Margaret's society,

which her close attendance on Mrs Beaufort occasioned. Exquisitely happy, however, were their brief interviews; and all things now appeared combined to shower happiness on Margaret. Sir James and Lady Mary Somerton presently arrived at Dingley; and Lady Mary, on further acquaintance with Margaret, acknowledged that her son's praise of his betrothed was not exaggerated; while her fortune, as Mr Carnegie avowed his intention of leaving all he possessed to his niece, equalled even her ladyship's bright visions of the increased wealth she coveted for her son. Before long, Margaret had also the joy of welcoming her parents at the Holt; and cordial and hearty was Mr Carnegie's reception of his deceased sister's husband. Mr Desmond, however, could not obtain an interview with Mrs Beaufort, ardently as he solicited it: she shrank from seeing him; and at the mention of his request, displayed so much agitation and uneasiness, that the subject was never more reverted to.

A painful sensation was created in Denbridge and its neighbourhood a few days before Margaret's wedding, by the sudden disappearance of Miss Grant from her uncle's house; while, notwithstanding that the most rigid inquiry was instituted, no subsequent

trace of her could be discovered. From the day of Mark Braddyll's decease, the unhappy Lilian had continued in a deplorable state of mental excitement ; so much so, that, at times, it was found requisite to subject her to personal restraint. Sometimes a lucid interval would dawn over her mind ; then her despairing agony was terrible to behold, and, in the vehemence of her bitter anguish, she would accuse herself of being the author of Mark Braddyll's death. In one of these intervals, of longer continuance than usual, when the *surveillance* over her was relaxed, Lilian had contrived to elude her nurse's vigilance, and to make her escape. She had taken nothing away with her ; and it was universally supposed that the miserable girl had committed suicide.

Although this event cast a gloom over all, it did not retard Margaret's union with Leonard Somerton. She was married from the Holt ; and though Mrs Beaufort declined being present, she permitted Ginevra to be one of Margaret's bridesmaids : nor did the latter forget to invite, and warmly welcome, her kind friends, Mr and Mrs Russell. The wedding-breakfast was spread in that apartment at the Holt, where the veiled picture hung which had formerly so greatly excited Margaret's curiosity ; and again her eye

instinctively sought it, when led by her uncle, Margaret, then Mrs Somerton, entered the room, followed by her bridal train. Its curtains were withdrawn, and with unspeakable emotion Margaret gazed on a magnificent full-length portrait of Agatha Beaufort.

Immediately after the marriage-ceremony, Mr and Mrs Somerton departed for Woodthorpe Park ; and before their return home to Dingley, after a month's absence, Mrs Beaufort and Ginevra had left the Abbey, and were already settled in the vicinity of Lisbon.

Mrs Beaufort remained abroad for three years, during which period Ginevra's health greatly improved ; she then returned to England, and again took up her residence at Methwold.

Mrs Beaufort no more astonished the neighbourhood by gloomy seclusion, or rendered herself formidable to her friends by haughty exclusiveness. She had learned to bear and to forbear ; to be tolerant and charitable : pardoning others their offences, as she hoped to obtain forgiveness for her own errors. Her heart was softened by the sympathy she met with from everybody : though conscience attested, that this kindness was a free gift on their behalf ; for in no past action of her life had she deserved it, or confer-

red upon those less prosperous than herself, in a worldly point of view, the many blessings her vast wealth enabled her to dispense. Mrs Beaufort, therefore, returned home an altered woman: no secret misgivings, or consciousness of disregarded duties, now weighed on her spirits; but her life thenceforth was spent in acts of benevolence. When at times the force of old habits, associations, and prejudices re-asserted themselves, and she was tempted, as in past days, to some deed of unchristian pride, the thought of her grievous errors, and the almost total neglect of every duty which characterized her past career, was sufficient to restore that lowly, humble frame of mind which Mrs Beaufort felt alone became her.

For many years Mrs Beaufort and Ginevra resided peacefully together at the Abbey; and, at length, in trustful resignation, the former submitted to the one more great sorrow awaiting her,—the death of her daughter. Thankful that Ginevra's life had been so long spared, Mrs Beaufort resigned herself uncomplainingly to a trial, which, in lowly contrition of heart, she acknowledged to be inevitable and deserved.

After this sad event, Mrs Beaufort almost wholly

secluded herself from general society ; though her house was ever open to Margaret, Mr Somerton, and their children, whom she loved to gather round her : nor was Mr Desmond or Mr Carnegie excluded from those meetings.

Mr Carnegie's admiration of Mrs Beaufort continued to the last hour of his existence. During the latter part of Ginevra's life, he would spend days and weeks at the Abbey ; devoting himself with such tender solicitude to the invalid, that at length the rough, eccentric old man became so beloved by Agatha Beaufort's child, that the dying girl seldom suffered him to be absent from her side.

It was long before Mr Compton recovered the shock of Margaret's marriage. At first he forsook his home ; but, after the lapse of several years, much to his parents' satisfaction, he married a worthy, estimable woman, who made him happy ; and whose society Mrs Somerton found an acquisition when at Woodthorpe.

As for Margaret and her husband, happiness, perfect as earth affords, fell to their lot. Every day augmented their mutual attachment, and increased their thankfulness for the numerous blessings surrounding them. Through the varied vicissitudes of

the past, Margaret had unweariedly sought to fulfil her duties with blameless zeal, and to act in all things according to the simple dictates of conscience. She now received her reward. None ever more gratefully acknowledged, or felt this truth to be more vividly exemplified by their own fate, than did Mrs Somerton :--that if, with a humble reliance on Almighty protection, the path of duty, however painful, self-denying, and irksome its aspect, be fearlessly and conscientiously pursued, its ultimate issue unfailingly brings peace ; while temporal blessings, also, are finally added, signal and abundant, to cheer and sustain the spirit amid its earthly contests : foreshadowing that higher, and perfect felicity which they, who take righteousness as an invincible shield, shall one day receive from Him who judgeth all things aright, and who readeth the secret impulses of every heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

“AND so, aunt Marion, you are fully resolved on this tour through the Highlands, despite my entreaties to the contrary?” exclaimed Alice Berners, half reproachfully, with a sigh, suddenly looking up from her book, as she sat reading in the drawing-room of her aunt’s pretty cottage in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh.

Mrs Cecil glanced up from her work ; her placid face wore a kind, well-pleased expression, very much at variance with the saddened, pensive gravity, overshadowing that of her beautiful niece.

“Certainly, Alice : your health requires change of air and scene. Indeed, my dear niece, it is very wrong of you to look so sorrowful and discontented, or to indulge in this careless distaste for the many blessings which you still possess. I remember that after your return from Canada, you were always

urging me to take this excursion, which you now so vehemently oppose !” replied Mrs Cecil, gently.

Alice smiled sadly.

“ Perhaps I might once have enjoyed it ; but now, —— ” she paused ; and bent her fair head over the book in her hand, whilst silent tears dropped on its page. “ You know, aunt, an enjoyment eagerly anticipated, is often granted when it ceases to be one ; and conviction frequently comes too late for reparation, and only serves to aggravate the memory of the past ! ” added Alice, after a long pause.

“ It is often so : yet, Alice, we should never despair. Present sorrow, you know, often heralds future joy. How can you tell now, but that Cuthbert Stuart may still be as faithfully attached to you as ever ; and only dreads that, when once his wife, your affection may not survive the inevitable change between your position then, and the past state and luxury you have been accustomed to during your father’s lifetime, and since, while resident at Methwold Abbey ? ”

Alice raised her eyes anxiously and inquiringly to her aunt’s face.

“ Captain Stuart thinks not thus, aunt Marion. Do not insinuate this, for that doubt has long been

dissipated. He has repulsed and discarded me ; let me not, therefore, seek to conceal the fact from myself in the smallest degree. He has never once written to me since our separation ; and in his letters to you—before they totally ceased, as they have done, you know, for upwards of four months—he never mentioned me, whom he once so fondly loved. Cuthbert justly scorns one false and perjured as myself ! ” exclaimed Alice, sorrowfully. “ No, aunt ; if only the obstacle you mention existed, Mrs Beaufort’s munificent generosity, most unmerited by me, must have obviated that scruple on his part. Margaret, who cared not to become either great or rich, has received both these blessings, with plentiful happiness. I, who degraded myself to become the accomplice of liars, am justly punished ; and consigned to a life of wretchedness, to be spent hereafter in vain regrets for what I so recklessly cast away,” continued she, excitedly.

Mrs Cecil did not reply. Arguments had so frequently been employed by her to soften the keen self-reproaches of her niece, that their very source seemed exhausted. She sat with her head bent over her work, to hide the tears which dimmed her own eyes ; yet, when Alice hurriedly left the room, a smile

glided over Mrs Cecil's kind face, and she murmured, "Poor Alice!" in a tone giving quite a different meaning to the apparent compassionate sympathy of her words.

This conversation between Mrs Cecil and her niece, occurred about six months after Margaret's marriage : nearly a year, therefore, had elapsed since Alice quitted the Abbey. During this period she had lived in strictest seclusion ; her spirits fled, her appetite failed, and the once lively, coquettish Alice shunned the sight of everybody, save her kind aunt. Remorse the most intense, preyed on her at times, for the unprincipled part she had taken in the late events of the Abbey ; while profound thankfulness arose in her heart that she had been preserved from sharing the public infamy and disgrace of her former friends, Lilian Grant and Mark Braddyll.

For some little time after Alice's arrival in Scotland, Captain Stuart corresponded at intervals with her aunt ; latterly, however, his letters had totally ceased. This complete severance of every link and interest between them, was still more heartbreaking to the penitent Alice, than the pang inflicted by Captain Stuart's omitting all mention of her in his letters

to Mrs Cecil. Still, Alice passionately clung to the memory of the past ; and the moments when Cuthbert Stuart and herself were all in all to each other, were the brightest spots that memory afforded. For some time, hope burned feebly in Alice's bosom: she could not bring herself to believe that Captain Stuart had given her up ;—he, who once loved her so fondly, could never deliberately refuse her hand when proffered so humbly by herself.

Time sped on ; expectation waned ; until, with his letters, it totally vanished: to be replaced in her heart by gloom, and a resignation to her fate, which Alice daily strove to render more humble and blameless. She was changed—changed in everything save her beauty ; which sorrow subdued and rendered more touching and heavenly, even if it had diminished somewhat of its brilliancy. Her dark eyes no longer flashed in playful triumph at the power her attractions exercised over all who came within their spell ; but their thoughtful pensiveness now added an indescribable charm to her countenance.

Alice passed many hours of her seclusion in reading ; more, at first, with the intent of diverting her thoughts from dwelling too tenaciously on the past, than from any real desire of improving her mind.

Mrs Cecil's library consisted of a well-selected, though small collection of books ; so that her niece, if she read at all, could not fail to reap both benefit and instruction ; for Alice had now little inclination for those lighter works of fiction—delightful in themselves, as affording occasional recreation, yet neither claiming nor possessing those stronger elements requisite to form the mind and direct the judgment—which had hitherto been her sole study. Yet, amidst her remorse and disappointed hope, sorrow had not rendered Alice morose and irritable : her whole desire seemed now bent upon pleasing, and testifying her gratitude to her kind relative ; who sheltered and comforted her when, drooping and nearly maddened under a sense of guilt and despair, she had sought her protection : and the effort Alice made to curb her despondency, and to greet her aunt at all times with cheerful affection, so as not by her presence to cast a gloom over the little household, endeared her greatly to Mrs Cecil.

Before her departure for Portugal, Mrs Beaufort wrote to Alice in the kindest terms, pressing her to pay a farewell visit to the Abbey. Alice, however, firmly declined to leave her aunt, or endanger her new resolutions, by exposing them to renewed temptation : at least, until she felt satisfied that the ordeal

might be safely incurred. Margaret also constantly wrote to invite Alice to visit her at Dingley; but all in vain—nothing could induce Miss Berners to leave Scotland. Mrs Cecil at length became alarmed at the settled melancholy, and disinclination to mingle with the world, that seemed gradually infolding itself round her niece's spirit. Alice now seldom spoke to her aunt of the past; and when conversation chanced to dwell on plans, or predictions for the future, she listened either with an incredulous smile, or the coldest disregard. Besides which, Mrs Cecil perceived with alarm, that without having any particular ailment, the health of her cherished niece was failing.

For the week preceding that in which Mrs Cecil left home to try the effect of the bracing air of the Highlands on her niece's health, the kind old lady appeared overwhelmed with correspondence; a thing most unusual for her, as nothing did she so much abhor as letter-writing. Alice gently proffered her aid to lighten her aunt's labours; but Mrs Cecil declined availing herself of any assistance, and regularly retired for several mornings to answer her letters.

The longest and most busy time must have an end; so, on the third day from the conversation with her

niece, recorded a few pages back, Mrs Cecil's epistolary labours concluded ; and, together, they set out on the trip which Alice so intensely dreaded. At the end of their first day's journey, they halted at a small town situated about half-way between Edinburgh and Aberdeen. On the road thither, Mrs Cecil's vivacity and lightheartedness greatly excited her niece's astonishment; though Alice could not feel that her depression had been slighted or disregarded, as nothing could be more tenderly affectionate than her aunt's attention and forethought for her comfort.

The travellers arrived at their first resting-place in time for a late dinner. After the meal was over, Mrs Cecil took her work, and settled comfortably at the window, amusing herself by watching the passers-by, and the bustle going on in the vicinity of the hotel ; while Alice, fatigued with her journey, threw herself languidly on a couch.

Three seasons had now rolled by since Alice quitted Methwold Abbey, and as she lay with her rich brown ringlets falling back from her snowy forehead, and carelessly resting on the pillow, the rays of evening, beaming in all their summer brightness, fell around her, lighting up her beauty with softened radiance. Her cheek was slightly flushed, and heightened the

expression of her dark eyes, sparkling amidst their long silken lashes with a lustre at once subdued and mournful. Her attitude was one of perfect repose ; her thoughts wandered far, far away, beyond the bold, majestic hills bounding the horizon, now all glowing with luminous vapour, as the sun sank to rest behind them. Mrs Cecil's liveliness had vanished, and she sat pursuing her occupation, regardless of her niece ; varying its monotony by indulging in long, wistful glances down the dull street. At length the room-door opened ; a waiter entered and presented a card to Mrs Cecil, announcing that a gentleman awaited permission to see her. Mrs Cecil took the card : and the servant quitted the room. Mrs Cecil then glanced towards Alice.

"Lord Aberford," at length read she, rising and approaching the couch upon which her niece reclined, and still holding the card in her hand.

Alice turned her eyes upon her aunt with a look of astonishment ; but she made no observation.

"Shall I ask his lordship to come up Alice? Lord Aberford is a fine, handsome young man, who has just succeeded to an ancient title, and noble estate ; and if you could manage to captivate him, your friends, my dear niece, could not wish you

greater luck. I can assure you that Lord Aberford is well worth winning ; and Cuthbert Stuart cannot always expect you to wear the willow for him ! Shall I desire his Lordship to be shown up here, dearest ? ” asked Mrs Cecil, moving towards the bell.

Amazement for a moment silenced Alice ; then she turned her dark eyes reproachfully,—sorrowfully upon her aunt.

“ This from you, aunt Marion ? This bitter mockery from your lips ! Have I then nobody’s esteem ? I will not see Lord Aberford ! ” replied Alice, vehemently.

“ Consider, Alice,—you cannot ever go on thus secluding yourself —— ”

“ Aunt Marion, I will not see Lord Aberford. If you wish to receive him in this room, say so, and I will retire,” replied Alice, half rising from the sofa, and speaking in a tone of resolute decision.

Mrs Cecil’s arm, however, encircled her niece, and drew her back to her former position on the sofa. A tear dropped also, on Alice’s smooth brow, as her aunt kissed her ere quitting the room.

For some time after Mrs Cecil’s departure, Alice lay silently on the sofa ; but her attitude was no longer

that of calm repose, for now she was weeping bitterly : weeping ; for her aunt's words recalled painful self-accusation. The evening shadows, which began to veil the distant landscape, seemed stealthily gliding also over her spirit ; obscuring that peace, resignation, and passive endurance of her lot, that she had striven so anxiously to acquire. And Alice buried her face in the cushion, and wept, as they only can weep whose hearts are wrung by hopeless despair.

Again, after a time, the door of the apartment opened, and some one advanced into the room. Alice quickly stifled her sobs, supposing it to be her aunt, and hastily looked up. A manly form stood by the side of the couch. Alice first gazed fearfully ; then, with a cry of amazement and delight, she rose and threw herself into Captain Stuart's arms. His past cruel repulse was forgotten in the joy and surprise of the meeting, as she felt herself clasped to his heart, and heard his murmured greeting of love.

“ Alice, ever dearest and beloved, our separation, if you have not quite cast me from your heart, is at an end ! I now look upon the Alice I have so long idolized,—no longer her whose ambition extinguished all that is lovely and gentle in woman ! Will you

pardon my apparent disregard, and love me as before, my own Alice?"

Alice's tears and agitation, however, continued; she could not speak, and her head drooped on Captain Stuart's shoulder. He hastily passed his hand across her pale forehead, then bore her nearer to the window.

"Tell me that I have not quite forfeited your affection, Alice, and that you will still be mine!" exclaimed he, after a few moments of anxious suspense.

Alice raised her head; her beautiful features quivered with emotion.

"I have mourned your alienation, Cuthbert, second only to my past sin. Your forgiveness and continued affection are bliss to which I am not worthy to aspire!" replied she, in subdued accents.

Captain Stuart's reply to this humble admission of past error, can be better imagined than described. Long then they talked of the past together, happy, exulting in the joy of being once more everything to each other; and with no secret obstacle or misgivings to mar their confidence in the truth and fervency of their mutual attachment.

Some two hours after Mrs Cecil had left the room,

she entered, and advancing unperceived by the lovers, stood behind Alice, and gently laid her hand on her niece's shoulder. Alice turned, seized her aunt's hand, and covered it with kisses.

The old lady smiled.

"I hope you have forgiven me, Alice, for my somewhat churlish disregard of your request, in troubling you with Lord Aberford's company?" said Mrs Cecil, demurely.

Alice turned toward Captain Stuart, with a look of incredulous astonishment and perplexity.

"Lord Aberford!" exclaimed she, slowly. "Cuthbert, what does aunt Marion mean?"

"Mrs Cecil is right, my Alice: I am Lord Aberford! Soon after my return home from Canada, I succeeded unexpectedly to my uncle's title and estates, owing to the accidental death of his two sons. Alice! what increased the bitterness of your desertion of me for Mr Somerton, was, that at the very time I knew myself to be possessed both of wealth and rank more than would satisfy your ambition! Had you only given heed to my entreaties, and manifested the sincerity of your attachment for me, by returning then to your aunt's protection, what happiness might now

have been ours ! I would not purchase your fidelity by avowing that I could give you the wealth and position you, at that time, preferred to my love ! My incognito in the neighbourhood of Methwold was easily preserved ; as I had but just succeeded to my title, and had no connexion in the county,—in short, I risked recognition. Mrs Cecil, who alone knew my secret, was sworn to secrecy. Afterwards, at Mr Carnegie's suggestion, that you were probably the victim of some wily intrigue (as you never replied to my letters) I came to Methwold, to seek you, to explain all, and claim your hand,—when your terrible confession deterred me ! I could no longer confide in one, who had proved herself so false ! Every subsequent step you took after our interview at Methwold, was closely watched by me. Your noble disregard of self, and the ample atonement you strove to offer for the past, renewed hope again in my heart. And now, Alice, I may fearlessly call you mine ! ”

Alice's face was hidden in her hands ; she was painfully agitated. She perceived now that truth, and uprightness of conduct, would have endowed her with a higher degree of distinction than even she had coveted ; while insincerity, and unworthy schem-

ing had plunged her into the deepest abyss of shame and misery.

Gently Lord Aberford removed the hands which covered her face.

“The ring, you perceive, my own Alice, prophesied truly : its motto is accomplished ! The joyful day, though it tarried long, has at length arrived, when, with trustful devotion, I may claim you my own, for ever !” exclaimed he, while his arm encircled her.

Little more now remains to explain, except that Captain Stuart’s accession to the honours of his family, was an event totally unexpected by himself ; and happened owing to the death of his two young cousins, by the accidental upsetting of a boat in which they were rowing. Although Captain Stuart knew that the revelation of his rank would at once have fixed Alice’s wavering heart, yet he justly shrank from thus possessing himself of her hand, and owing her preference to the mere gratification of her vanity and avarice. Throughout, Mrs Cecil, who was sincerely desirous for the reformation and ultimate happiness of her niece, was his zealous, and vigilant

coadjutor ; and daily from her pen, Lord Aberford received most minute details respecting Alice's conduct and health.

When the sincerity of her niece's repentance was sufficiently tested, Mrs Cecil concerted with Lord Aberford the scheme so successfully executed for their reunion : his ardent impatience to behold his betrothed again, could scarcely be restrained until the termination of her ordeal ; as his Lordship's country seat was situated only a few miles from Aberdeen ; where, in seclusion rigid almost as Alice's, he had passed the interval of their separation.

On their return from their bridal tour, Lord and Lady Aberford spent some weeks with Margaret and her husband, at Dingley Grange. Alice met Mr Somerton with feelings of the most painful embarrassment ; but her arm rested on her husband's, who met her timid look, with a glance so full of love and confidence, that, reassured likewise by Mr Somerton's warm and friendly greeting, Alice quickly rallied from her momentary confusion. Lady Aberford and Mrs Somerton ever remained firm friends ; while Alice's future career testified how sincere her repentance had been : for, beloved with fond devotion by her hus-

band, she ever sedulously sought to adorn her high station by the practice of the most active and extensive beneficence ; deeply feeling its responsibility, and zealously fulfilling its varied duties.

Late in the afternoon of one of those delicious days when spring is merging into the fuller and richer luxuriance of summer, some seven or eight years after the occurrence of the events recorded above, a group of people were assembled at the corner of one of the principal streets of Ghent, attracted by the sight of an English travelling equipage, standing before, and just on the point of starting from, the portal of the principal hotel of that ancient city. After a time, the knot of idle gazers was joined by a nun, in the garb of a Béguine, who happened to be slowly passing up the street. A small rush basket hung from her arm, containing food, and other alms doled out daily to the necessitous by the charitable sisterhood ; to distribute which was evidently the errand on which the nun was bound. Her complexion was sallow, and careworn, and her face looked prematurely aged,

apparently from sickness, or other causes ; for her figure, as far as the cumbersome dress, and veil of the order, permitted it to be seen, was rather youthful than otherwise. Her pale features were sharply cut, and firmly outlined ; while an expression of extreme sternness and asceticism encircled her mouth, and furrowed her brow. Thick, dark brows shadowed the nun's eyes, which were presently fixed, with a look of intensity and poignant anguish, on the occupants of the carriage, that still stood before the inn door.

A lady and three lovely children sat in it ; and a handsome military-looking man paced with folded arms up and down in front of the hotel, whilst horses were being harnessed to the carriage. The lady's figure was the perfection of graceful dignity ; and her exquisite features beamed with happiness and pride, as she first smiled upon and caressed the pretty golden-haired children, and then fixed her gaze on the gentleman ; who, every now and then, paused at the carriage-door to address her. In truth, no happier woman than Lady Aberford existed ; for, since her marriage-day, not a cloud troubled her career : all had been, hitherto, prosperity.

But still there the nun stood, her eyes riveted upon

the carriage, and fascinated, as it were, by its occupants—drops of anguish falling like rain over her dark brow ; presently the basket fell from her grasp ; and at last her trembling limbs seemed to refuse to sustain their burden. Many kindly hands pressed forward to support and assist the nun whose devotedness and reputed sanctity had rendered her conspicuous, even among the numerous and saintly inmates of the great Beguinage of Ghent. She, however, roughly repulsed assistance ; and a murmur of anguish passed her pale lips, as for an instant she covered her face with her hands, and then withdrawing them again, renewed her steadfast gaze.

All at once Lady Aberford's eyes fixed themselves on the knot of curious gazers, and, after a cursory glance, rested intently on the prominent figure of the nun. Gradually a look of surprise and emotion stole over her face ; then, starting from her seat, she hurriedly beckoned to her husband. A few hasty words were exchanged between them ; Lord Aberford then crossed the narrow street, and approached the group at the corner ; but the Béguine, the object of his search, was gone. Precipitately she had snatched up her basket, drawn her veil closely round her face,

and darted away down a narrow intricate alley close at hand.

The humble, coarsely-clad nun, was Lilian Grant.

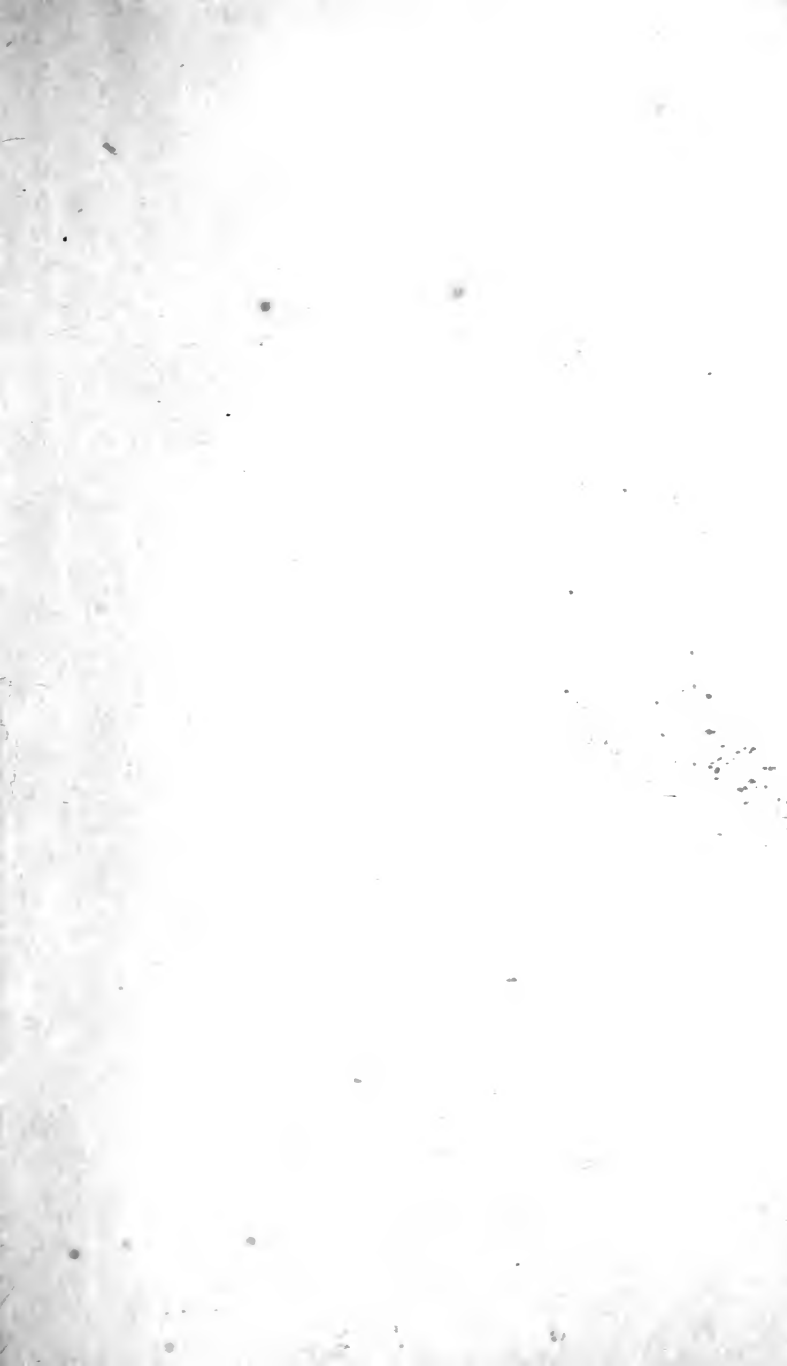
After a variety of vicissitudes, she had embraced the Romish faith : that religion which relieves from all personal responsibility in spiritual matters ; and which teaches that earthly penance and ascetic observances will open the gates of heaven to the vilest of criminals.

THE END.

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